

Western Impact on the Tamil Creative and Literary Criticism Works

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
9442621106 / 7339129324
schelliah62@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper attempts to lay focus on the western impact on the Tamil literary field, through its thoughts and critical theories. Both English and Tamil Criticism play an important role in their field with Tamil criticism having a long literary tradition rather than English Criticism. The literary theories during the ancient periods articulated by commentators, which help the Tamil literary criticism to bring out the originality of the text. Literary field has creative and critical activities, making the reader understand the western impact on the Tamil literary field.

Keywords: Tamil literary criticism, Western critical theory, literary tradition, critical thinking, moralistic approach.

“Criticism is the branch of study concerned with defining, classifying, expounding and evaluating works of literature” (Abrahams 36). It was the common explanation given by Abrams. But when one looks into the stalwarts’ definitions regarding criticism which met with the explanation of their own notion, one will have a comprehensive of it. For example, Arnold wrote very often in his essays thus:

“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” (P 42)

In the words of F.R. Leavis, “the common pursuit of true judgement that is how the critic should see his business” (The Common Pursuit V). In Europe, the art of criticism began in ancient Greece in 4th century B.C., during the period of this century, there was found to be out and out an intellectual awakening in Athens. All learned critics and men like Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Socrates, Aristophanes took to writing critical works. The first critical

work which came into eminence was *The Frogs* by Aristophanes produced falling in line with the critical thinking and relative merits of Aeschylus and Euripides. As Aristophanes puts it, the creative art and the critical art are one and the same. Later it got divided into two. The 4th century was, no doubt, found to be an age of critical inquiry and analysis. Only in 427 B.C., criticism took its reasonable shape in the hands of Plato, the discipline, did vehemently attack poetry and banned the poets in his ideal world. Then the criticism passed into Plato's disciple Aristotle who went to the extent of calling poets 'imitators'. Then criticism started surviving in the hands of Roman classicists. Horace and Quintilian and then in the hands of Longinus.

Despite the fact that western criticism did significantly emerge from this background, the first English man who used criticism is Sir Philip Sidney who defended poetry by writing *Apology for Poetry* and making it clear that his concept of poetry is to teach and delight, for he followed the model of Aristotle and his criticism was almost like a reply to Gossons who dedicated his *School of Abuse* to Sir Philip Sidney. Then the history of English literary criticism had Ben Jonson better known as a poet and a dramatist than a critic. But he proved himself as well-known critic through his *Discoveries* generally considered as a valuable addition to criticism. Then appeared *An Essay of Dramatic Poetry* by John Dryden, which was regarded as the lonely but important work upholding Aristotle's theory of poetry as a process of imitation and his slogan was that the very object of poetry was to delight and transport instead of teaching. Dryden was called the father of English criticism by Dr. Johnson, for from his alone, English Criticism took a clear root. Then came Alexander Pope who followed the classical tradition and wrote *Essay on Criticism* using his critical opinion about the criticism as "a critic is born to judge, as a poet is born to write". Then criticism started growing in the hands of Dr. Johnson who critical outlook was explicated from his writings like Preface to *The Plays of Shakespeare* and *Lives of the Poets*.

Literary Criticism changed its course and methods in the Romantic Age as a protest against the neoclassicism. William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge laid the foundation for the romantic criticism with the chief tenets of this romantic criticism being ignoring rules, being impressionistic and individualistic in approach, laying emphasis on emotion and imagination. *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and *Biographia Literaria* are considered the two best works that bear the critical theories of the romanticists, for their criticism was creative. With the emerging of Victorian compromise, the fight between the neo-classical school and romantic school came to an end. Matthew Arnold, the key figure in his age, did obviously dominate the literary field with his creative works and essentially by his critical works like *Preface to the Poem of 1853* and *The Study of Poetry*. The 20th century saw the birth of New Criticism with T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis as notable critics who made their critical theories so influential and reasonable. In this evolution of literary criticism down from the Ages, Poetic criticism started approximately in between 427 BC to 348 BC with Plato who banished poets from his ideal world. In English critical tradition, the poetic criticism started right from Sir Philip Sidney and Matthew Arnold set

right the poetic criticism as a separate discipline and Novel criticism started only from the Criticism of F.R. Leavis.

Just like English criticism, Tamil criticism is said to have a long literary tradition. In the early phase, Tolkappiyar was regarded as the originator of Tamil literary criticism through composition of *Tolkappiyam*. He framed his literary principles into two kinds – thematic conception and poetic convention in clear terms. They were mutually related. In Porulathikaram, the third book of *Tolkappiyam*, Tolkappiyar explains the themes of ‘aham’ and ‘puram’ which relate to romantic poetry and heroic poetry respectively. In the beginning of the fourteenth century, Saint Umapati, a Saiva acharya (Spiritual preceptor) contributed a very good guideline for critics by pointing out that the very essential duty of a critic or the commentator is just like removing the dust on the gem and rejoice in the true luster of the gem and to him, literary criticism also implies appreciation. Most of the literary theories in the ancient periods were articulated by commentators and these commentators of ancient Tamil books were considered to be the best critics. This shows the originality of Tamil literary criticism in the early days. Atiyarkkunallar of twelfth century, the learned commentators of *Silappadikaaram*, as a sensitive critic probed deep into the expressions given in the original text about the character and tried to elicit their fullest significance. In the thirteenth century, Parimelazhahar the greatest writer on *Thirukkural* and Perasiriyar and Senavaraiyar, the writers on *Tolkappiyam* exposed the ways to look at the vast areas of literature and grammar and in the 14th century, the critique of Naccinarkkiniyar, “consists of word meanings, special notes, grammatical explanations, paralleled quotations from various sources, connecting of various verbs to the finite verb ending a sentence and several other features” (Ramalingam 1127). Naccinarkkiniyar commented on *Kalithohai*, an ‘aham’ poetry of the Sangam age and the epic *Cintamani* showed his reverence for the author. This attitude did induce so many writers who succeeded him. In the medieval period, the Vaishnava commentators are said to have successfully replanted the experience of the Alvars in the minds of the readers, thereby focusing more light on their philosophical approach. They were endowed with a creative talent holding the inspiration theory. In the 18th century, Sivajnana Swami as a prolific writer and a bold critic always condemned strongly the views of others writing an elaborate commentary on the *Payiram*, which means *Preface* and the first cuttiram, which means sutram of *Tolkappiyam*. He is the first critic who held the view that a true critic should be well versed in more than one language and the 19th century was regarded as the period of Renaissance in India life and literature. The Renaissance in Tamil was ushered in after the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857.

The general awakening resulted in the rapid expansion of prose writing as an important branch of literature. In the words of Ka. Na. Subramaniam,

“Generally, it can be said that Indian literary renaissance is a change that happened in Indian minds due to the reading in English” (Kalai Nutpangal 64)

This kind of change brought Tamil literature in line with the new writings like novel, short story and essay which showed the liberation from the conventional way of writing. Following this direction, the criticism in Tamil came up well by shooting into new standards. M. Ramalingam 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” (P1128).

C. V. Damodaran Pillai and U.V. Swaminatha Aiyar did the greatest service in rescuing innumerable classics from oblivion and editing them correctly and Swaminatha Aiyar always gave a valuable introduction and copious notes into cross references which were of immense value to the student and the critics. And it was V. Kanakasabhai Pillai who wrote *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*, that made the scholars realize the greatness of Tamil tradition thereby paving the way for the opening of a new era for literary criticism. Ramalingam pointed out by making such a statement that the first three or four decades of 20th century might be called the period of the new classical criticism in the history of Tamil criticism. Maraimalai Adikal is said to have given a new direction to contemporary criticism by applying the western principles to evolve a work of art. He defined poetry as an aesthetic creation of beauty and insisted on the sound appreciation of any work of art by improved standards and methods of criticism. T. Selvakesavaraya Mudaliyar and V.V.S. Aiyar were called the pioneers of the modern literary criticism. T. Selvakesavaraya Mudaliyar was a good essayist who wrote ‘poetry’ and ‘prose’ in his *Tamil Viyasankal*. Here in this book,

“He goes deeply into the nature of poetry and elaborately discusses the various elements – form, imagination, poetics and style” (Ramalingam 1129).

Then, V.V.S. Aiyar was considered to be a notable writer-critic who applied the canons of western literary criticism so as to bring out the significant features of the epic in his critical study of *Kamba Ramayanam*. He strongly claimed that Kambar was superior to Homer, Virgil and Milton in certain respects and he is said to have used *racanai*, a term normally equated to the term ‘appreciation’, for criticism in his Tamil version of his study. Following V.V.S. Aiyer, then sprang up the aesthetic criticism headed by T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliyar who got exposed to the literary criticism through his aesthetic study of Kambar’s Ramayanam. Then T.P. Meenakshisundaram, a critic known for his profound scholarship in various fields, might well be considered one of the makers of modern Tamil criticism. His two important books namely *Kanalvari* and *Kudimakkal Kappiyam* revealed his critical principles. He approached literary works purely as a literary investigation. The criticism of prose fiction was born along with the emergence of prose fiction. M. Ramalingam writes:

“We find a critical essay on Prema-Kalavatiyam in a very old journal *Viveka Cintamani* in the last decade of the 19th century, written by P.S.Subramaniya Aiyer” (P1129).

After P.S. Subramaniya Aiyar, came Ka. Na. Subramaniam who was primarily an impressionist and introduced the earlier prose fiction to the general reader in his *Mutal Aintu Tamil Navalkal*. (The first five Tamil novels), where he placed himself in the history of Tamil literary criticism. Besides his creative writings, his critical writings earned him the name ‘critic’. His *Vimaricanak Kalai* and *Ilakkiya Vicaram* stand as good example to his view of blending western and eastern concepts of criticism. Then the two books namely *Tamilil Ilakkiya Vimaricanam* (literary criticism in Tamil) and *Tamil Cirukathai Pirakkiratu* (The birth of Tamil short story) helped in making criticism gain new dimension. R. Dandayudham’s *A Study of the Sociological Novels in Tamil* was found to be almost the first systematic study of Tamil novels, nourishing literary principles and judgement to have an elaborate study of Tamil fiction. His *Novel Ilakkiyam* and *Punaikataivalam* (The wealth of fiction) were almost the effective tools to critically assess the literary merits of twelve fiction writers. Following them, a few literary stalwarts like P.Sri A.Srinivasaraghavan and a newer set of critics like C.S. Chellappa, K. Kailasapati, V. Ramakrishnan, C. Raghunathan are some of the comparative critics making some distinction in this new genre.

Thus, for knowing the exact beginning of the literary criticism as a literary activity consciously one should have a clear cut idea about the Tamil criticism especially before and after Ka. Na. Subramaniam. One can easily visualize the degree of western impact on Na. Ka. Su. and his service to Tamil Literature as a creative writer and a critical writer was found to be something remarkable. Next to Vu.Ve. Saminathaiyer who was called “Illakkiyathattha” (literary grandpa), Ka. Na. Subramaniam was called “Periyavar Ka. Na. Su.” He was influenced by the western thoughts and theories to the extent that all the literary writers irrespective of age criticized him for his too much of being westernized in his thought and theories. But rather undoubtedly, it is Ka. Na. Su. who provided room for the Tamil literary field so as to make it live in the climate of creative hope. He was solely responsible for the incoming of English critical theories and methods to India, especially Tamil literary world, for Ka. Na. Su. was, during the British rule in India, consciously or unconsciously kindled by the culture of the western people. This desire for British culture prevailed in the hearts of all people irrespective of all disparities. Even literary people tried to follow the culture of the west. The educated people of all degrees looked for the accommodation of western culture and writing. Reading western literature became the fashion of those days. It was at this time Rabindranath Tagore won the Noble Prize for Literature for his *Gitanjali*.

One cannot deny the fact that the western impact on writers like Tagore and Na. Ka. Su. was rich enough to release worth thinking and sound critical thinking in order to enrich the Tamil literary creative as well as critical field for without discriminating as eastern and

western literature for the sake of discrimination, they looked at all literatures as one under the purpose of 'world literature'.

To conclude, it may be said that the western writers falling in line with the thinking of western stalwarts like Arnold, Eliot and Leavis joined hands with them in presenting a moral touch in their creative writings as well as critical pronouncements, with the sole intention of giving more importance to the growth of Tamil literary field both in the creative and critical activities than the moralistic approach to teach in all respects. In a world, the reception of western literature coupled with critical thinking, has, no doubt, exerted a good impact on worthy influence and effect on the eastern critical and creative field in all respects enabling rather richly any reader or writer to understand and evaluate, the worthy impacts exercised by the western writers on the minds of eastern writers/critics.

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