



A Critical Discourse of Myths and Mythological Characters in Tamil Literature

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.12628307

Abstract

The paper intends to study the use of Myth in Tamil literature. Myths are bygone narratives about the gods and goddesses or individuals of exemplary characters and deeds. The earliest available literary works of all the three Tamil Sangams are referred to as "Sangam literature". The Sangam age is between 300 BC and 300 AD. Among the literary works of the first and middle sangams, "Tolkappiyam" is the only literary work now available, as the other works were lost in submersion. It is an old Tamil grammar text, in which the names of gods viz. Vishnu, Skanda, Indra, Varuna and goddess Kotravai are mentioned. It serves as a handy reference for the use of mythological stories in Tamil literature. The past Sangam literature mainly consists of the great five epics among other works. The first among the five epics "Silappathikaram" with its central character Kannagi, seems to be based on a historical story. As a deviation from other works, Kannagi, a woman of chastity, is elevated to the status of goddess. After the Sangam and post-Sangam period, "Tirumurai" a compilation of hymns in praise of Lord Shiva by 63 Nayanmars and "Nalayira Divya Prabandam" a compilation of hymns in praise of Lord Vishnu by twelve Alvars also indicate the usage of mythology in Tamil literature.

Keywords: Tamil Literature, Myths, Characters, God, Goddess.

Introduction

Myth or mythological stories in any literature refer to traditional phenomena, which may also be a social one. Mythological stories in Tamil can be found in the earliest available literature known as 'Sangam literature'. This literature has references to the gods and goddesses worshipped by the Tamil race during that period. In the post-Sangam period, five important epics namely *Silappathikaram*, *Manimegalai*, *Sivakasinthamani*, *Valayapathi* and *Kundalakesi* were produced. These epics deviated from the earlier practices of adoring the Gods and Goddesses to adoring the heroes and heroines of the epics. For example, *Silappathikaram* and *Manimegalai* adored the heroines namely Kannagi and Manimegalai respectively. In the later period, they were elevated to the status of goddesses.

Sangam Literature

The word 'Sangam' means 'association of Tamil poets'. The Sangam age is approximately between 300 BC and 300 AD. There are archaeological and literary references about three sangams that functioned in Ancient Madurai, Kapadapuram and Thenmadurai. There is also a mention of a continent known as 'Lemuria'.



Ancient Madurai [first sangam] and Kapadapuram [middle sangam] were situated on that continent. The said continent was submerged in the Indian Ocean, due to natural calamities. It is believed that Agasthiyar, the ancient Tamil Siddhar, chaired the first Tamil Sangam. The literary works of the sangams are classified as 'Pathinen Melkanakku' books composed between 200 BC to 100 BC and 'Pathinen Kilkanakku' books composed between 100 BC to 300 AD. The important works in the latter category include *Thirukkural*, *Palamoli*, *Naladiyar*, etc. *Thirukkural* is a didactic book on ethics written by Thiruvalluvar. The literary works of the first two Tamil Sangams were lost due to the deluge of Kumari. The only work that is still available is 'Tolkappiyam' of the middle Sangam. The works of the final Sangam survived and were classified into 'Ettuthokai' and 'Pathupattu'. 'Ettuthokai' consists of eight works and the important ones are 'Agananooru' and 'Purananooru'. Likewise 'Pathupattu' consists of ten works and the important ones are 'Thirumurugatrupadai' and 'Pattinappalai'.

Tolkappiyam

Tolkappiyam is the only Tamil literary work, produced during the middle sangam, that survived in the submersion of first and middle sangams. It is said to be more than two thousand years old and the first ancient Tamil grammar text. There are mentions of Tamil gods and goddesses like Vishnu, Skanda, Indra, Varuna and Kotravai in the text.

Vishnu

Vishnu also known as Perumal is mentioned in *Tolkappiyam* as the deity of forests. During the period, he was given the status of 'Paramporul' and was glorified as 'supreme deity'. It was believed that his Lotus feet could remove all the sins or evils and grant 'Mukthi' to devotees. 'Alvars', a group of Tamil poets cum saints and followers of the deity, glorified him in the post-Sangam period. There is also a mention of Vishnu in 'Paripadal', another Sangam literature, A few verses of the *Paripadal* describe him as 'the substance and meaning of everything in the world.

Skanda

Skanda also known as Murugan or Karthikeya is a Hindu god. He destroyed evil-natured Asuras such as Taraka and Surapadman. He was hailed as the God of war and victory. He is the son of Goddess Parvati and Lord Shiva. He is also called 'Arumugan' for his six faces. He is worshipped not only in India but also in Sri Lanka, Singapore and Malaysia. His vahana (mount) is a peacock and his flag depicts a rooster. He married the daughter of Indra, namely Devasena and Sundaravalli, a tribal woman. Arunagirinathar, a poet-saint, was inspired by Murugan and he wrote a poetic verse called "Thirupugal" to bring out the fame of the deity.

Indra

In Hinduism, Indra is the king of devas. He is also the god of rain and Storms. He is considered the bravest of the gods and known for his battle against monsters. He is compared with the Norse god Thor and the Greek god Zeus. His ammunition is Vajra, a mace and his vahana is 'Airavata' a white elephant. He is known for bringing rain to hydrate the fields containing fertile crops which belong to devotees. In modern days, Indra has lost his fame and is not largely worshipped by people.

Varuna

Varuna is mentioned as the god of the sky and Oceans in Tamil mythology. He is hailed as the principal deity of the Neithal Sangam landscape (sea and its adjacent areas), He is highlighted as the ruler of the sky realm and upholder of cosmic and moral law. He is Compared with 'Ahura Mazda', a Zoroastrian God. Varuna is considered to be present in the



water pot installed in any puja and worshipped as such. He is also worshipped as the guardian of the West direction.

Kotravai

Kotravai is described as the Goddess of the Palai region [deserts or sandy areas in the early Sangam literature]. Kotrvai is also referred to as the goddess of war and victory as well as the mother goddess, a symbol of fertility. She is depicted as a deity with several arms holding different weapons, dancing atop the beheaded body of a buffalo demon known as Mahishasura. Because of this act, she is mentioned as Mahishasura-mardhini, in the latter Sangam literature. Her vahana is a lion as well as a black buck. There are mentions of this deity in *Nerunalvadai*, *Maduraikanchi* and *Pattinapalai*, which belong to the group of *Pattupattu* produced in the era of the final Tamil Sangam.

Post Sangam Literature

The second century onwards is considered to be the post-Sangam period. The illustrious works in that period include the great five epics namely *Silaparthikaram*, *Manimegalai*, *Sivaka Sinthamani*, *Valayapathi* and *Kundalakesi*, following Bakthi hymns have been produced by Saiva as well as Vaishnava is known as 'Nayanmars' who produced 'Thirumarai' consists of twelve anthologies between eleventh and twelfth centuries. Sekkizhar's *Periyapuram* is considered to be the twelfth one. The main deity worshipped by the Saivates is Lord Shiva. Likewise, Vaishnava saints known as Alvars produced 'Nalayira Divya Prabandan', which consists of four thousand hymns contributed by various Alvars to lord Vishnu. The main deity of the Vishnava sect is Vishnu. *Thirukkural*, a unique work on ethics was authored by Tiruvalluvar during this time.

Kannagi

Kannagi is described as a goddess of chastity, for her noble deeds by *Silaparthikaram*, an epic written by Ilanko Adikal, the younger brother of the Chera King. She is the central character of the epic, which describes the marriage between Kovalan and Kannagi and Kovalan's love for Madhavi, a dancer. It also described his ruin of business and Wealth, in Kaveripoompattinam, a town in Chola kingdom and exile to Madurai, a town in Pandya kingdom While trying to sell his wife's anklet for starting a new business, he was falsely set up in a theft case by a wicked goldsmith, who had stolen the queen's a anklet. He was executed without trial. Kannagi, the widow, came to Madurai and proved her husband's innocence. She then tore off one of her breasts and flung it to the ground. At once, the kingdom of Madurai burst up with tall flames and was destroyed, because of her power as a faithful wife, she then moved to a place called 'Vannathiparai', which is located in the Idukki district of Kerala and situated about 1337 meters above mean sea level. After a few days Kovalan, accompanied by some Devas, arrived at the place in a Pushpaka Vimana and carried Kannagi to heaven. After that incident, Chenguttuvan, a Chera king constructed a temple known as 'Mangaladevi Kannagi temple' and performed regular pujas. At present, it is closed throughout the year except during the Chitra Pournami festival. Kannagi is also worshipped by Sinhalese Buddhists as 'Goddess Pattini'. Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka worship her as Kannagi Amman. In Kerala, it is believed that she is an incarnation of Goddess Bhadrakali.

Thirumarai

Thirumarai consists of twelve anthologies produced by various 'Nayanmars' in praise of Lord Shiva. Among them. Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar are the most famous ones. They produced a lot of hymns about Lord Shiva during their lifetime. Nambiyandar Nambi, a Shaiva scholar, compiled their works in seven volumes and named them *Devaram*. This happened during the eleventh century. To accommodate the works of other Nayanmars,



Manikkavacakar's *Tiruvagasam* and *Tirukovayar* are appended as eight volumes. *Tiruvisaippa* and *Thiruppallandu* is the ninth volume, which was contributed by various Nayanmars. Thirumular's *Thirumandiram* is added as the tenth volume. The works of Karaikal Ammaiyar, Cheraman Perumal and Nambiyandar Nambi are included in the eleventh volume. Sekkizhar's *Periyapuranam* contains the details of all 63 Nayanmars and has been added as the last and the twelfth volume.

Periyapuranam

It is the twelfth volume of Thirumurai. It describes the life of all the 63 Nayanmars. Their devotion to Lord Shiva and his devotees. A special mention is to be made of the story of Siruthondar Nayanar. The said Nayanmar is ready to serve the needs of the devotees, who visited his house, even at the loss of his only son.

Nalayira Divya Prabandam

Nalayira Divya Prabandam contains 4000 hymns produced by twelve Alvars in praise of Lord Vishnu. The Alvars popularized Vaishnavism predominantly in Tamil areas around the 5th to 8th centuries. Their love and devotion towards lord Vishnu is unconditional. Nathamuni, a Vaishnavite poet-saint compiled the same in its present form during the 9th to 10th centuries. Among those, the important ones are Nammalvar's *Thiruvaymozhi* and female Saint Andal's *Thiruppavai* and *Nachiyar Tirumoli*. The daily service at Vishnu temples such as Srirangam includes chanting of *Divya Prabandam*.

Thiruppavai

It consists of thirty Pasurams, in praise of Vishnu. The author is a female poet-saint Andal. She personified herself as the lover of Lord Vishnu and dreamt about her marriage with him. With context to this, she wrote most of her Pasurams in the style of wedding songs.

Conclusion

There is no dearth of "myth" or mythological stories in Tamil literature. The antiquity of the Tamil language and the culture that prevailed from time to time are implicated in the types of mythological stories used in the literature. The Sangam as well as the post-Sangam literature mentions the worship of gods and goddesses namely Vishnu, Skanda, Indra, Varuna, and Kotravi. *Tolkappiyam* is the proof of the ancient phenomenon. The post-Sangam period is known for the five epics and Bhakti hymns of Nayanmars and Alvars. Most of the epics dealt with historical stories. However, the heroine of the epic *Silappathikaram*, namely Kannagi, was elevated to the status of God for her deeds. In commemoration of this, the Mangaladevi Kannagi temple was built in the Idukki district of Kerala.

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Author (s) Contribution Statement: Nil

Author (s) Acknowledgement: Nil



Author (s) Declaration: I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



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