

**“NEW EXPERIENCES, NEW LANDSCAPES, NEW TEXTS:
A CULTURAL AWAKENING? -
A STUDY ON THE POEMS IN TIME WILL WRITE A SONG FOR YOU”**

Shriganeshan,K

ABSTRACT

Sri Lankan Tamil poetry has already seen the shift from the traditional themes to the very modern ones and from the lyrical form to the free verse. The themes like displacement, exile, death, disfigurement, resistance, and alienation have found their ways into the modern poems. The lyrical quality observed in Mahakavi, Murugian, Neelavanan, Sanmugam Sivalingam and SOPA has not been followed by many a new poet. While the new poets of the 80s and the 90s accommodated the new themes that emerged after the war, the diaspora has found a new landscape of the colder regions and added a sixth to the list of five thinai categories. Thus, there seems to be a space for the marginalised exploited by the new Tamil poets of the late 20th Century. The present study attempts to see whether the poems included in the anthology titled Time will Write a Song for you: Contemporary Tamil Writing from Sri Lanka published by Penguin Books India in association with French Institute of Pondichery (2014) would open a new space for a cultural awakening.

1.INTRODUCTION

Sri Lankan Tamil poetry was entirely identified with the traditional verse before the sixties expressing the conventional religious themes, nature adorations and some national and love sentiments. Even with modern themes like caste structure or class structure and nationalism poets like Mahakavi, Murugaian, Neelavanan did not change their traditional forms except the fusion of spoken rhythm with the traditional forms in the sixties. Kanaganayakam (2014) states that Sri Lankan Tamil poetry has

already seen the shift from the traditional themes to the very modern ones and from the lyrical form to the free verse.

The shift in literary style began in the 1960s with a number of writers, including Mahakavi, Murugaiyan and Neelavanan, who in their poetry sought ways to break free from the stifling formal practices of traditional verse. (Kanaganayakam, 2014:41)

A gradual shift is from description in rhetoric language to conversational in its diction and rhythm. The poetry has to change in its form

and style for accommodating a different sensibility and a different sense of audience as there is a need to express the changing scenario in the political and social scene. Poets try to push the limits of the poetic language due to the horrendous political situation. Violence was the order of the day in the North and the East of Sri Lanka in the eighties. There were different forms of terror: terror of the state forces and the terror of the so-called freedom fighters. Both contributed much to the untoward suffering of the people. Subsequently they became the subject matters of the poems written by many a poet. The poets have to look for a new language and a new set of symbols to record the state of affairs during the War. The challenge faced by the Tamil poets was to find proper diction to express new experiences: new suffering and new encounters. Diction in Tamil did not often possess the capacity to access the new and often traumatic experiences that confronted the Tamils (Kanaganayakam, 1998). The language had to undergo changes to become capable of accessing new dimensions of experience in many a new landscape within their territories due to displacements and found in other lands in the Western and American cold lands. While Sri Lankan Tamil poetry in translation found accommodated in Canaganayagam, (2001) and (2013), Samarasinghe (2012) and Wijesinha (2013), the present collection taken for study is an outcome of the research programme of Contemporary Tamil Culture at the French Institute of Pondicherry. The researchers who translated and edited the Sri

Lankan pieces are not of Sri Lankan Tamil origin. Thus, the present study on the anthology under review gets the significance for research. Further, translations would be able to provide the true spirit of the sensibilities of the communities as the writers from the first language are able to speak out very well of their lives (Shriganeshan, 2001).

The poets of the sixties

Mahakavi, Neelavanan and Murugaiyan are some of the poets who deal with the traditional themes in the traditional metres. Even in its free verse form, the Sri Lankan Tamil poetry, quite distinct from Indian Tamil poetry, sustains an element of lyricism derived from classical prosody accommodating folk and spoken Tamil. A major portion of this anthology consists of poetry, which remains without doubt the high point of achievement in Sri Lankan Tamil Literature (Kannan et al 2014). Though the first group of poets are categorised under traditionalists Mahakavi moves away from the traditional themes and deals with the theme of caste in The Temple car and the Moon :

there was a struggle/ and a man killed.

 look, there rolls in dirt /and kin of the one /
 who touched the full moon/ just the day
 before!" (p.2)

Neelavanan's poem in rhythmic pattern with high lyrical quality speaks of a common theme like perseverance to induce man to work hard and complete the task before the

limit of time and amidst all odds and ends:
Oh...oh...driver/ even before the path
disappears/ in the sorrowful
teardropseam of the fog/ even before the
moon's sickened shadow/ behind us begins
to follow along... (p.24).

The shift from the traditional themes to the very modern Ponnampalam, Nuhuman, Shanmugam Sivalingam and many others accommodated social and political contexts in their poems. M.A.Nuhuman breaks away from the tradition of speaking of typical themes of the seventies like caste struggle, proletarian concepts and dowry system and includes the contemporary problems of shooting and burning of the city by the Security forces.

"So this morning dawned/ in the city
streets we had been walking/ rifles were
roaming in khaki uniforms/ bullets were
raining down/ boring into bodies/ they were
drinking souls (p.28)

Jesurasa 'In your plight also' portrays how an ordinary man would be branded as a terrorist.

You may be returning from the beach/ or
you may be returning home/ from the theatre
/ sudden sound of a gun shot/ followed by the
sound of hurrying boots/ you having died/
will lie/ fallen in the street/ a knife will sprout
in your hand:/ a gun will sprout too!/ you will
make your name/ as a 'terrorist'/ no one can
question anything. (p.29)

With the 1983 riots Sri Lankan Tamil poetry was politicized very much (Kanaganayakam in Wijesinghe 2013: 131). V.I.S.Jeyapalan who simply sings of a common problem like drought and the hope for the rains to shower upon the land in his poem Hope (p.31) and poverty in 'Seashore' (p.32-33) started to sing about the effects of ethnic conflict. The trend was obviously noted by critics. Shanmugam Sivalingam commits himself to sing about the war effects in his 'Unsung Songs': in the street the corpses stink,/ when the bullets broke the lock/ the white doves fell head down/ wings broken, and lie cruelly curled/ the boys leave without telling us/ they tell us to look for corpses on the shore/ they tell us the corpses heaped on the shore/ are the ones that were dumped in the sea/ but still/ you tell me to sing.

New Experiences in new forms

The poetry of the 1990s' breaks away from this lyricism, probably due to the stark reality of the war that surrounded them.

A war-pinned life/ without courtyards to
play in/ without alleyways for wandering
cycles/ the ground has taken you away./ the
gun was thrust on you/ is eating you up -
Deebachelvan (p.183)

Displacement after displacement happened many a time during the final phase of war between the Tigers and the Sri Lankan security forces in 2008/09 and Deebachelvan records:

At this time we have no city either/
we have no life/we who have
nothing/ are ourselves absent. /still
we need you/ to eat with us the little
of the half-cooked rice and boiled
lentils. /come quickly/ let's move on
again, to yet another place. (p.184)

S. Vinodhine in her poem titled Those
who killed them records what the situation
was during the war:

they had no sense of it/ even in dreams/ that
became in sleep/ it must not have happened
the weapons of sorcerers/ who blindfolded
the night devoured them/ tomorrow they will
lie drying in the sun/ before the next hunt.
(174)

T. Malarselvan narrates another
experience in his poem Barrel-toothed Ghost
as follows: the night is cruel now/ impossible
to write in words/ the ghost climbed onto my
shoulder is ready at any moment/ to destroy
my head/ he's only an infant/ what does he
understand? (p. 177)

The poems found in this anthology lead
us to think about unthinkable experiences of
violence, displacement, dispossession and
vulnerability. Sivaramani records: when
guns are thrust / at society's birth cord/ the
dream of a butterfly that might sit/ on the soft
edge of a flower/ is nothing to me (p.50)

Sivaramani also questions the very
existence of the woman in the society and
speaks about humiliating experiences of the
womenfolk at the hands of the male

chauvinists in Woman humiliated (p. 72).
While Vilvaratnam depicts the plight of the
people who fight the summer days for a drop
of water in 'Summer scorches day after day',
may be symbolically the horrendous
situation at that time in the Northern and
Eastern parts of Sri Lanka Ilavalai
Wijayendran points to the violent approach
the opponent party adopted in his poem 'To
those who come with sticks' 'when you have
lost to words/ and come with sticks/ to show
your strength/ what can I say?' (77)

Aswagosh in his poem, Darkness calls
and complains to the Almighty about the
situation: oh merciful one, did you hear/
crows are cawing/ a cock is crowing/ trees
are waving in the wind/ deaths are taking
place (p.75)

Pa. Ahilan describes in 'Days in the
trenches' what happened to his society on a
good Friday the day which reminds Jesus'
Crucifixion on the Cross,' the day was our
last day in town/ we came to the seashore. It
speaks of the displacement of the society due
to the war. Cheran who has been recording
each phase of human suffering faced by the
Tamils in Sri Lanka has pointed out that the
illusion of heroism in the name of language
would not be meaningful unless and
otherwise there is humanness in every move
of the society: do not trust words completely/
for within these heroes dwell those who
crushed/ their enemies' military might / and
also those/ who chopped the heads and
breasts of innocent people? (Heroes Rest
Here, p.94-97)

V.I.S.Jayapalan condemns the ejection of Muslims from Jaffna and has this to say:
oh my neighbour, oh my neighbour/oh suns
glowing in skullcaps and veils/oh moons
playing joyfully on the sands/oh stars
smiling in every cradle/our children have
lost their way/they tore you apart/they
wounded our Ealam soil...

R.Muraleswaran in his poem 'Lost Life':
Why is he looking at the sky? /She could have
looked at the earth/ since that was where/she
lost her son Bose Nihale too has to speak about
lost life: Yesterday /I felt like an old man/ my
nerves trembling with fear of the dark/ in the
poems I wrote in war-filled days/ you can
smell bones and hear the sounds of men and
even nerves/ oh god! /I have lost/ even the last
note of the veena that faded away in the wind/
there was nothing in it but the waning moon/
afterwards, everyday/ dawned by the sun/ a
poem long and dark.

Nilanthan describes the situation in Vanni during the last phase of war. All the people were marginalised. No one is spared. Everybody has to contribute to the collective suffering: Those were cruel days/ Weapons were blunted/ Or bounced back/ All those who thought with their blood/ Went off to the heaven of heroes/ and oh, the people who gave up their firstborn children/ became prisoners or refugees/ on a day given up/ even by loving people/ the unparallel hero/ his unparallel sacrifice/ a rare heroic era/ with dreams frozen in its eyes/ and garland of fading sirissa/ vanished, sunk in the mud of the seashore.

Nilanthan continues in Part iii: in Nandhikadal lagoon/ man from Vanni once more became a refugee/ from among long-gone corpses/ from among/ rejected prayers/ he came fleeing N.Sathyapalan uses the image of a flickering flame symbolically suggesting the contemporary humanity which fights for survival in this part of the globe ends with an agonising note: not knowing how to write to the wind/ to submit their prayers/ the flame and the wick suffocate/ the moments roll along and dissolve.

Thus the marginalised become the subject matter of the poetry which undergoes much transformation during and after the war.

2. CONCLUSION

The Tamil poetry in general and the Sangam poetry in particular worked within a static spatial framework. The stasis accounted for the five-fold division called *Tinai* in Tamil poetics where each landscape generated its own specific experience of love. Hilly regions, paddy fields, forests, seashore and the barren lands are the five landscapes where people lived and experienced and shared their feelings of love, separation, frustration, longing for the love, and petty quarrels of a wife over her husband's flirtations. With migration of the Tamil people from their homelands to colder regions in the Western lands, the Tamil community faced another landscape with much cold climate and the literary pieces produced based on the life in the colder

regions have to be identified with another spatial frame work. Cheran, a Sri Lankan Tamil poet who lives in Canada theorized the Diaspora as the sixth Thinai, the biome of snow. Kanaganayagam (2014) says this sense of innovation is in itself is a point of departure, a point of growth for Tamil poetry. In this collection Rashmy, Selvam Arulanantham, Aruntati, Cheran, Ilavai Wijayendran, V.I.S.Jayapalan, S.Chelian, Tha. Ahilan, S. Vinodhine, Ki.Pi.Aravinthan are the expatriate poets whose poems are included in the collection taken for study. But the anthology does not consist of any single one of their poems which speaks about the experience they have gained in the land where they have settled down. The anthology establishes that Sri Lankan Tamil poetry accommodates new texts emerging with the problems faced by the marginalized who have become the victims of war. These new texts depict the new experiences of the people which lead to a new cultural awakening. In a way the poems speak the plight of the people in order to bring out a new phase of life without violence and suffering. The collection makes the world aware of the pathetic life undergone by the people in this part of the world. The attempt would have fulfilled dual purposes at one shot had the editors included the expressions of the diasporas' lives of the poets that they have chosen. Then another landmark would have been achieved- a landmark of growth for Tamil poetry with the sixth Thinai through the anthology taken for discussion.

REFERENCES

- Cheran, et al eds., 1985. Maranthul Valvom Living within Deaths. Jaffna:Thamiliyal Kanaganayagam, Chelva (1998) in Innumoru Kaladi: A Book of International Tamil Writings. Janarthanan, V. et al (eds.) (1998). United Kingdom: Tamil Welfare Association.
- Kanaganayagam, Chelva 2001. Lutesong and Lament: Tamil Writing from Sri Lanka, Canada: TSAR Publications.
- Kanaganayagam, Chelva. (2013) In Our Translated World: Contemporary Global Tamil Poetry. Canada: TSAR Publications
- Kannan et al. (2014). Time will Sing a Song for You: Contemporary Tamil Writing from Sri Lanka. India: Penguin Books.
- Nuhuman, M.A. and Yesurasa, A. (1984). Pathinoru Eelathuk Kavignarkal - Eleven Eelam poets. Madras: Cre-A.
- Samarasinghe Wimaladasa. 2012. Poems from the SAARC Region. Sri Lanka:SAARC Cultural Centre
- Selvamanoharan Thiruchelvam and Shriganeshan Kandiah (2014) (eds.). SOPA 75: So.Pathmanathan's 75th Birthday Felicitation Number. Jaffna: Thoondi.
- Shriganeshan Kandiah (2001) in Silva Neluka and Wijesingha Rajiiva (ed.) 2001. Across Cultures: Issues of Identity in Contemporary British and Sri Lankan Writing. Colombo: The British council
- Wijesinha, Rajiva, (ed.) 2013. Mirrored Images: An Anthology of Sri Lankan Poetry. India: National Book Trust