



The governing features of Greek and Tamil Elegies as sharing the credit of standing in parallel lines in treatment of Themes: An Appraisal

Dr. S. Chelliah

*Professor, Head & Chairperson, School of English & Foreign Languages,
Department of English & Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai (Tamil Nadu), India*

(Corresponding author: Dr. S. Chelliah)

(Received 18 December, 2017, Accepted 17 January, 2018)

(Published by Research Trend, Website: www.researchtrend.net)

ABSTRACT: This paper attempts to define ‘elegy’ with its usage in Classical and Tamil literature with a focus on treatment of its various subjects like death, war and love and how both Greek and Tamil ancient poetry treat a common theme in elegiac tone and structure. It beautifully pictures the resemblance between Greek and Sankam poetry and shows how both Greek and Tamil elegies share the credit of standing in parallel lines as most of the themes like war, death, love and evanescence of youth are treated with apt examples in abundance measure.

Key Words: Classical poetry, Sankam Poetry, resemblance, Parallel lines, war, love, death, abundant measure, common theme, elegy, usage.

The word ‘elegy’ means a lament in Greek. In classical literature, an elegy was only a poem composed of couplets of dactylic hexameters and pentameters. The subjects were various – death, war, love, etc. It was only in the 16th century that the elegy came to mean a poem of lament for some tragic event or a poem of mourning for an individual. The elegy is usually divided into three parts – 1.expression of grief 2.glorification and reflection and 3.consolation. The poem begins with the poet’s coming to know of death of the lamented one and the expression of sincere grief, while the second part deals with the qualities of the departed man and usually a train of philosophic reflections ensue. Finally, the poem ends with a note of resignation and joy that the man is not dead but is living in another world.

‘Greek Elegy’ deals with “the greatest variety of subjects – love, the wars which the poet’s city waging, the political feuds among the citizens, the laws or principles which the poet wishes them to adopt, his own opinions on the manners and morals of the day, his views as to the best way of enjoying life, festive pleasure, lamentation for the dead, everything that the poet and his friends are wont to think and talk off” (Jebb 102). What he said of Greek literature is also exactly true of ancient Tamil poetry. Anyone who reads this similarity will surely raise up his brows in wonder to see, how two different literatures of two different countries with different tradition and culture stand in parallel lines.

Greece, a country of Southern Europe comprises the Southern Peninsula of the Balkans, the northern foreshore of the Aegean. Greek literature was produced over a much wider area and also by those whose mother tongue was not Greek. Even before the Turkish conquest in 1453, the area had begun to shrink again and now it is chiefly confined to the territory of the kingdom of Greece. The ancient Tamils noted that the habitable parts of the earth’s surface were divisible into five natural regions. The manifestation of human life corresponded to the characteristics of the milieu in which each tribe has grown. “The five regions were called Kurinji, the holy country, Palai, the dry waterless region, Mullai, the wooded land between the highlands and the lowlands, Marudam, the lower courses of rivers and Neydal, the littoral tract, that which skirts the Sea” (Iyengar 3) [6].

Regarding Greek literature, the classical poetry of Ancient Greek consists of the Epic tradition, Lyric Poetry, Tragedy and Comedy. Of the literature of ancient Greece only a relatively small proportion survives. Yet it remains important, not only because much of it is of supreme quality but also because until the mid nineteenth century the greater part of the literature of the western world was produced by men. Those who were familiar with the Greek tradition either directly or through the medium of Latin were conscious that the forms they used were mostly of Greek invention and who took for granted in their readers some familiarity with classical literature. Tamil poetry

arose about thousand B.C., but almost all the poems of the first millennium, including those on which Agattiyanar, Tolkappiyar and other early grammarians based their grammatical researches have perished. Yet they were all occasional odes on one or other incident of love or war, as described in the poruladigaram of the Tolkappiyam. The Sankam poets were bound by certain very definite laws of form and expression which have been enunciated in the most ancient Tamil text on grammar and poetics, Tolkappiyam. However, they were creative poets of great ability, they did not allow their production to become formal, stale and hackneyed. The sap of creative life pulsates through every line. “Tolkappiyam divides all literature into two on the basis of its subject matter – interior and exterior poetry. The pride of place in Sankam Literature has been given to Interior poetry” (Subramanian 3) [8].

Love as the subject matter of poetry was studied in amazing detail by the ancient Tamils. They appear to have gone further ahead in the matter than the ancient Greek or the Sanskritist Hindus of our country. Love, according to the Tamils, can only be felt and experienced; it is subjective and not expressible in terms of words. They certainly were aware of gross, carnal passion and being men of subtle understanding, they did not treat it in the manner they treated love. One-sided love that is destined to remain unrequited and all forms of unsuitable and violent passions were separately classified, and it is different to find examples of poetry treating them. The poets were so sensitive and high-minded that they abhorred much low and unnatural forms of law. For the rest, they analysed love into five stages or moods, and with a clear and unique comprehension of poetry they associated each of them with a particular physical setting.

Both Greek and Tamil ancient poetry treat a common theme. To start with the point, both the Greeks and the Sankam people gave importance to courage and valour. According to the Greeks, death is an end to all but death by war alone brings fame to man. The hero who dies without fighting in battle, will never be respected. The idea of Callinus, a Greek poet,

“Unlamented he dies – unregretted – not so
When the tower of his country, in death falls the brave,
Thrice hallowed his name amongst all” (Hades 161)

is vividly seen in Purananuru, where a member of the warriors family died of ill-health [4]. It was the custom to put the corpse on a bed of grass and slash it in twain with a sword that he might go to the hero’s heaven. If a hero dies heroically in a war, “his glory, his name shall never die” (The Greek poets 164) has been the central idea of Greek and ancient Tamils. Personal poems treating the theme of love come under elegiac poems. Sappho’s longer pieces tell us of the in tenses moments in her emotional life. She is capable too of pure joy, when she hears the water pattering among the apple trees, or sees the moon swelling to fullness, or the evening star brings back the sheep and the goat and the child to its mother. She can write with scorn of an ignorant woman who will flit dimly among the unsubstantial ghosts because she has never plucked from the Pierian rose – tree, or with exquisite and fitting beauty of the young bride,

“Like the sweet apple which reddens upon
the top most bough,
A top on the topmost twinge – which the
pluckers forgot somehow –
Forgot it not, nay, but got it not, for none
Could get it till now” (P 164).

This resembles the song by Parinar in Kuruntokai 120;

“Like a poor man craving pleasures,
You want most, what is most precious, my heart.
The same way you learned
How good she is,
You didn’t learn how rare she is
and difficult to obtain” (Kuruntokai 64)

Unfulfilled love has been the subject of Sappho’s love poetry. Because of this unfulfilled love, Greek poets like Anacreon and Stesichorus have abused their very life on earth by singing;

“In less than two and twenty
My cares have worn out” (Hades 304)

My Helidora, flower of my devotion,
wept of all mankind” (Hades 373)

This goes in tune with the elegy by the Sera king, Kottambalathuthu Thunjcia Makkuthai. When he lost his wife, his feeling of sorrow knew no bounds. Hence this song is sung:

“What charm hath life henceforth for me?

.....

My queen hath left me. Like the Sea
Though deep and surging is my grief,
It has no strength, alas! to me
From hated life to bring relief
Would that grim death had come to me!
The fairest queen on earth is dead.
The nectar of my life was she;
Ah, therefore hath my angel fled?”

(Sanjeevi 13)

Pak kudukkai Nan Kaniyar, a Sankam poet anticipates death anytime in his life. This is similar to a poem by Meleager, where he says,

“That morn which saw me made a bride,
The evening witnessed that I died” (Hades 374)

Both Sankam and Greek poems deal with the evanescence of youth. Mimnermus hates the old age by saying,

“. hateful old age come upon us,
Striking the good and bad equally cruelly down”

(Hades 165)

In *Purananuru*, one can find a lyric of high order. An old man bent double with the weight of the old age looks at the sunlit meadows of his youth, through the vanished innocent joys of the spring-time of his youth. “Will the youth with all its innocent past time ever return to me?” is the passionate cry of the old man who falls into a melancholy reverie over the buried joys of his early childhood. One can perceive the same note of sadness, in Pladimu’s poem where he says,

“I loved, I played, I drank my wine
In youth’s brief blithesome hour of sadness
who has not heard the voice divine.
Inviting joy akin to madness?
Alas! it’s o’er! my wrinkled brow
Comes like the warning of a sage
To say that pleasure’s past, and now
my thoughts change into suit my age” (378)

Is it not exceedingly surprising and strange that this mood of an old man lamenting over his vanished youth was captured and imprisoned in one of the immortal lyrics of the Sankam Age? Philosophy also finds an outlet in the elegies. A poet called Solon, who lived in 640 B.C. said that a man’s life in this world is full of sufferings and man himself is responsible for the sufferings. The same philosophy is seen in Sankam poet Kaniyan Poonkunranar’s poems. Just like the Greek poet Alcois, who feels that life in this world is to be enjoyed, the same thought runs in the mind of Koogai Koliyar, in *Purananuru*:

“We must not let our spirits give way to grief
By being sorry we get no further on
My Bukchis, Best of all defences
Is to mix plenty of wine and drink it” (188)

So far the resemblance between Greek and Sankam poetry has been traced and accordingly both are called sisters. They both speak by and to the same organs; the bodies in which both of them are clothed may be said to be one of the same substance; they appeal equally to readers and the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both.

To conclude, it may be said that Greek and Tamil elegies share the credit of standing in parallel lines as most of the themes like war, love, death and evanescence of youth are treated with apt examples in abundant measure.

WORKS CITED

- [1]. Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, inc., 1971.
- [2]. Bowra, C.M. *The Greek Experience*. New York: The World Publishing Company, 1957.
- [3]. Chadwick, H.M. *The Heroic Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940.
- [4]. Hades, Moses (ed.) *The Greek Poets*. New York: The Modern Library, 1953.
- [5]. Hudson, W.H. *An Introduction to the Study of Literature*. Madurai: Kural Neri Publishing House, 1968.
- [6]. Iyengar, P.T.S. *History of the Tamils: From the Earliest Times to 600 A.D.* New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1982.
- [7]. Pillai, J.M. Somasundaram. (1968). *A History of Tamil Literature: With Texts and Translations*. Annamalainagar: Annamalai University Press, 1968.
- [8]. Subramanian, A.V. (1968). *Sips from Sankam Cup*. Tirunelveli: The South India Saiva Siddhanta Works, 1968.