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Elements of Poetic Technique in Old Tamil Poetry

Abstract

This paper is devoted to an analysis of several poems belonging to the *puram* division which represents the heroic theme in Tamil poetry. K. Kailasapathy (1968) convincingly demonstrated its formulaic character and suggested its oral origin. He was not correct, however, in identifying this poetry with epic tradition. The major generative factor of the *puram* poetry was a kind of ritual, its main part consisting in the performance of panegyric songs praising patrons. This practice, outlined in the paper, presupposed the existence of a formula in the songs and at the same time gave place to individual poetic initiative. The paper shows the elements of oral technique and gives examples of when such elements were used and developed by poets to create rather complex poetic compositions.

One of the questions which we usually put to any piece of literature is the question of its origin. To be more precise, there should be a number of such questions, because, as we know, a piece of literature is a result of several different factors which can be defined as generative. There are among them: the time and place of its creation; the type of literature within which it was composed (oral or written, clerical or secular, folk or court, etc.); a single author or a group of authors; its audience and the mode of its performance; its aim (teaching, preaching, amusing, extolling, narrating, and so on). All these factors decidedly influence the artistic structure of a literary piece and play a significant role in the process of forming its style, mode of expression and everything that can be broadly defined as a combination of its literary characteristics. Therefore, a literary analysis should try to take into consideration all the above mentioned factors, while not overlooking a possibility of their interaction. Otherwise the analysis might prove to be not precise.

A conspicuous example of a misunderstanding of this kind is the work by a prominent scholar K. Kailasapathy, who in his pioneering and in many respects brilliant book *Tamil Heroic Poetry* (Kailasapathy 1968) failed to notice some important generative factors of classical Tamil poetry. He proposed a theory which culminated in such a statement: "The application to early Tamil literature of the details of oral techniques postulated for

Homer and many other oral bards by the Chadwicks, Parry, Thomson, Bowra, Lord and others justifies the method and warrants the conclusion that it, too, belongs to the same category of literature.” (Kailasapathy 1968: 228)

Rightly insisting on the oral roots of Tamil poetry, K. Kailasapathy considered the old Tamil texts as a product of an oral tradition and demonstrated convincingly enough the most characteristic features of its style: formulae, themes, cycles, etc. But at the same time he certainly failed to take into consideration other factors and circumstances concerning the genesis and functioning of the tradition. Naturally, he did not take into account a problem which had arisen after his time, namely, that the texts of the so called *caṅkam* poetry are later imitations of earlier Tamil poems (Hart 1975: 157) or even Prakrit and Sanskrit models (Tieken 2001: 231). However it might be, anyone acquainted with Tamil poetry will agree that to equate it with heroic epic poems like the *Iliad* or the *Mahā-bhārata* exclusively on the basis of the oral technique is obviously an exaggeration, to say the least. One should not forget either that the formulaic style is also inherent in literary works of a different origin – in Ṛg-vedic hymns as G. Hart pointed out (Hart 1975: 154-155); or, I can add, in the songs of the French medieval poets, the troubadours, composed, incidentally, in a written form.

In this paper I do not consider the problem of the origin of the texts as such but pay attention to the tradition that constitutes its background and is revealed through them. In order to understand the peculiarity of old Tamil heroic poetry from this point of view, we should lay stress on such generative factors as place and aim of performing poetical compositions in this tradition. They are clearly not long epic narrative poems, they are songs which were created to eulogise the valour, power and generosity of Tamil kings and chieftains. Their milieu is represented by a certain social setting, a complex of actions, which I chose to name a panegyric ritual (Dubyanskiy 2000: 63-64). This ritual falls under the category of so-called rites of passage. Their structure is threefold: the first stage represents (sometimes symbolically) the moving away of an individual or a group from a previous state (which is defined in terms of social status, cultural position or even locality); the second stage is characterised by an uncertain social position, the lack of a status, and is often connected with different sorts of trials and sufferings, sometimes symbolic death; the third stage symbolises reincorporation into society and culture and is connected with the ideas of renovation and rebirth.

It is known that Tamil wandering poet-singers, or bards as scholars often call them, before meeting a king undertook a long and difficult journey, which along with their miserable state (hunger and poverty) clearly constitutes the second stage of the described ritual. After the performance they were given food, dress, rich presents and they went home, in accordance with the third stage of the ritual, restored to a new life or, we can say, reborn. The panegyric ritual was in no way the personal matter of a king or a poet but had an important social meaning. It symbolically represented a meeting of a king with his subjects (*kuṭi makkaḷ*) and their mutually benefiting interaction. Poets eulogising a king or a chieftain multiplied not only his glory but also stimulated his inner energy and power, which he, on his part, returned to his people (thus symbolically supporting them)

in the form of lavish gifts, food and dress given to poets. This symbolic function of the ritual gave rise to the theme of a king's generosity which is by no means second to the theme of a king's heroic deeds, valour and power (actually the two are the sides of one coin). In Sanskrit tradition this theme finds its place in hymns called *dāna-stuti*.

Now, it is clear that the situation in which Tamil heroic songs were composed and performed considerably differs from that of epic poetry. Let us recollect a passage from the *Mahā-bhārata* (*Kaṇṇa-parvan*, 32.1-2). Dhṛtarāṣṭra addresses his charioteer, Saṃjaya: "When two armies came together in their war formations, how did it happen that Pārtha attacked the saṃśaptakas and Kaṇṇa the Pāṇḍavas, oh, Saṃjaya? Tell me about this battle at length."

"At length" is here a crucial expression. Saṃjaya, who was a *suta*, a skillful epic-teller, draws a huge and long verbal picture of the battle going on before his eyes. Stimulated by Dhṛtarāṣṭra's questions and remarks he develops a long chain of episodes following one another. As for Tamil poets, they never told lengthy stories and they described battles very briefly. Old Tamil heroic poetry in its essence was not narrative. It was descriptive and expressive, and poems in most cases were constructed as the monologues of a poet addressed to a king (or at least were meant as such). That is why their most striking stylistic feature is an abundance of appellative forms, emphatic particles (*ē, ō, āl, til, marra, mātō*), rhetorical questions, exclamations such as *polika um pukaḷē* (*Puranāṇūru* 62,19; further on – PN) – "let your glory flourish"; *vālka avan taḷē* (PN 70,19) – "long live his foot"; *yārkol vālka avan kaṇṇi* (77,6) – "who is he? long live his wreath!"; *yānkum ariyavum ulavō niṇakkē* (56,15-16) – "is there anything impossible for you?", etc.

Apart from this obvious sign of the highly emotional, expressive style of the panegyrics, one's attention is attracted to the regular use of parallel grammatical constructions: attributive, interrogative, exclamatory, comparative. Generally speaking, this is a typical feature of epic, or more broadly, folk style. As a famous Russian folklorist E. Meletinsky noted, "the repetition of a line with a variation of the stressed word is an important figure of folk verses" (Meletinsky 1968: 47).

Let us analyse one poem from the same anthology (PN 4):

The blood splashed on swords that have brought victory
makes them beautiful, like red evening sky.
Their war anklets worn down on the battlefield, the legs
of conquerors are as smooth as the horns of killer bulls.
Shields spring holes from ringing arrows
as if they were mobile training targets.
While their riders gauge the time for attack
and urge them forward, horses bloody their mouths,
chafing at the bits, like tigers tearing throats.
Elephants assaulting gates, in ferocious action,
have blunted the points of their white tusks
and seem like Death himself devouring life!
And you in your splendor

on your chariot decked with gold
 and drawn by finely moving horses with waving plumes
 are as wondrously radiant as the red sun when it rises
 high into the sky out of the black ocean!
 Because this is how you are,
 the country of those men who have made you angry
 wails without end, like a hungry motherless child!
 (Hart, Heifetz 1999: 10-11)

Schematically, the structure of the text of this poem can be represented as follows:

1. *vāḷ* (swords)...
2. *pōṇṛana* (are like)
3. *tāḷ* (feet)...
4. *pōṇṛana* (are like)
5. *tōḷ* (shields)...
6. *pōṇṛana* (are like)
7. *māvē* (horses)...
8. ...
9. *pōṇṛana* (are like)
10. *kaḷiṛē* (elephants)...
12. *pōṇṛana* (are like)
13. *nīyē* (you)...
14. ...
15. ...
16. *ceññāyīṟṟuk kaviṇai mātō* (you are beautiful like the red sun!)
17. ...
18. ...
19. ...

The poem provides a good example of the above mentioned definition. Parallel lines with a full repetition of the final position and a variation of initial, metrically stressed alliterated words clearly stand out. There is no doubt that this poetical method has its roots in folk or epic oral poetry (which constitutes an important addition to the examples of oral technique made by K. Kailasapathy). But in poetry repetitions and uniform parallel constructions produce special fascinating effects (much more powerful than in long epic poems) and variation of the length of lines, sometimes uneven rhythmical patterns form a sort of ecstatic monologue – a genre considerably developed in medieval Tamil religious (*bhakti*) poetry.

So, I hold that the method of using parallel grammatical constructions, though it has its origin in folk and epic tradition, functions in Tamil poems differently. Poets did not use it spontaneously but tried to utilise it as a productive artistic device. Parallel constructions had become a frame of many poems, and the poets saw their task as making such a frame strong and at the same time beautiful and elegant. The method had become a matter of poetical skill. Let us take for instance the poem PN 49:

(Hart, Heifetz 1999: 37-38)

If he had more
he shared it

in many more plates.

Where is he now?

He gave us
all the flesh
on the bones.

Where is he now?

Wherever spear and arrow flew,
he was there.

Where is he now?

With his palms scented
with lemon grass,
he caressed my hair
smelling of meat.

Where is he now?

*The spear that pierced his chest
pierced at once
the wide eating bowls of great and famous minstrels,
pierced many begging palms,
and, dimming the images in the eyes
of men he sheltered,
it went right through the subtle tongues
of poets
skilled in the search
for good words,
Where is he now,
father, mainstay,
king?*

Where is he now?

No more,
no singers any more
nor anyone to give anything
to singers.
As in the cold waters
jalap flowers blossom,
large, full of honey,
but die untouched, unworn,
there are many now living
and dying,
without giving
one thing
to others.

(Ramanujan 1985: 169)

This poem on the whole seems to be a good illustration of what I said earlier. But one fragment (lines 10-15: “The spear that pierced his chest...” – in italics) is especially interesting:

aruntalai irumpāṇar akan maṇṭait tuḷaiyurūi
irappōr kaiyuḷum pōkip
purappōr puṇkaṇpāvai cōra
añcol nuṇṭērcip pulavar nāvil
cenru vīlntanru avan
aruniṛattu iyaṅkiya vēlē.

The brilliant artistic plan of this fragment consists in the inversion which is not preserved, unfortunately, in the translation of A.K. Ramanujan. Placing the subject of the sentence (*vēlē*, that is a spear) at its end Auvaīyār makes this passage a sort of riddle. A listener does not know what exactly is defined by the chain of adverbs (in italics) ending in the finite verb *vīlntanru* (‘pierced’), which is put before the subject. The clue to this riddle, the point of the passage, comes only with the word *vēl*, ‘a spear’, which is placed, as I said, in an unusual final position.

Such poems clearly show that poetic elements which typologically represent elements of oral technique (parallelisms and repetitions in this case) become intertwined with skillful verbal work by poets, who could be defined – to use the expression of Auvaīyār – as *añcol nuṇṭērci pulavar* (“learned poets of beautiful words and refined skill”).

In this work Auvaīyār herself was an expert, which can be shown by one more example, a famous poem PN 95, again devoted to the valour and generosity of Atiyamāṇ. It is said that she was sent by him as an ambassador to a chieftain Toṇṭai. On seeing his armory she exclaimed:

Bedecked with peacock-feathers, garlanded with flowers
 Fine are the Tondai spears in the spacious armory,
 With their strong shafts and sharp points bright with ghee.
 The weapons of my king are blunt with fighting,
 Broke their points through parrying the thrusts of the foe,
 The swordsmith’s forge is busy with repairs.
 My king, when rich, freely gave food away,
 When poor he messes with his men.
 He is the head of the family of the poor
 Yet great is he, with his sharp-pointed spear.

(Marr 1985: 188)

The theme of this poem is again a spear (*vēl*). It makes the point of the poem which sums up a contrastive parallelism (used and heroic spears of Atiyamāṇ versus looked after but idle spears of the other king). It can be stated that the clue-word here

constitutes a kind of specific formula representing (to use the definition of a Russian scholar M. Meylah) a suggestive element of a poetic language, which may be treated irrespective of its concrete realisation in a verse. "Among such formulae there is a class comprising specific units of expression: word-themes or word-clues gradually crystallising in the process of poetic usage and forming word-myths." (Meylah 1975: 88-89)

Adjusting this definition to Tamil poetry, I can say that such words (one-word-formulae or grain-formulae) crystallise in the first place in the sphere of myth and ritual and can be termed as word-concepts. Such words are extremely saturated with meaning and form an ideological frame of the poetry. For the panegyric poetry they will be: *kaḷam* ('the field of battle'), *kaṭaṇ* ('duty'), *aruḷ* ('grace'), *vēl* ('spear'), and so on. Many such formulae form series of binary oppositions. For instance: *vēntu* – *maṇṇar* ('king' – 'enemy king'), *nāṭu* – *kāṭu* ('country' – 'wilderness'), *vaḷam* – *vaṛumai* ('richness' – 'poverty'), *paricu* – *pariciṇmai* ('gift' – 'a want of gifts'), etc. Without discussing here this idea further I return to Auvaiyār who took up one grain-formula (*vēl*) and developed it into a full-fledged poem based on contrasting opposition. By interpreting this common formula in her own original, witty and paradoxical way Auvaiyār found new possibilities of expressing a panegyric idea.

Poetical reinterpretation and development of oral formulae and parallel constructions seem to be an important (perhaps, the most important) and productive way to cultivate poetic technique. No doubt the situation in which panegyrics were performed very much stimulated such cultivation, because the idea of demonstrating one's cleverness and skill to a king gradually grew more and more attractive to singers and poets.

It gives us a possibility to consider the panegyric ritual as one of the most important generative factors of poetry (for the panegyric poetry and its style in particular). It is apt to conclude this paper by saying that the places where the panegyrics were sung (*nāḷavai irukkai*) were points of meeting of folk and semiprofessional poetical tradition with the tradition of professional erudite poetry represented by the so-called *pulavar* ('learned poets').

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