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CONTENTS

Abstract

The *Cilappatikāram*, a work attributed to Prince Ilango, is one of the finest achievements in Tamil literature. Sophocles, the second member of the so called Greek Tragic Triad, is perhaps the best playwright of the classical Greek tradition. Deianeira, the heroine in Sophocles' play *The Women of Trachis* or *The Trachiniae* shows some traits that may be compared to those of Kannagi, the heroine of the *Cilappatikāram*. Kannagi remained loyal to her husband in good and evil. She did not blame him for his marital infidelity, and she changed her conduct only when her husband lost his life by an unjust order of the king.

Deianeira, Heracles' wife, becomes aware of her husband's feelings towards a slave girl, Iole, brought to their house after a successful military expedition. Although suffering, she doesn't change her attitude either toward the girl for whom she was moved to compassion before, or toward her husband. Relying on an old fallacious prophecy, in order to win back his consort she causes, unwillingly, his death by giving him a poisoned garment. It is too late either for their son or for Heracles to learn the truth, Deianeira, spouse and mother, commits suicide. The only relief for Heracles from sorrow and pain is to be brought on top of the hill Oeta and to be burnt on a pyre.

Fate and tragic error, divine vengeance, absolution and the purificatory power of fire are effective in both works. This paper would undertake an investigation of contrasting and comparable features in Ilango's *Cilappatikāram* and in *The Women of Trachis* by Sophocles.

KANNAGI AND DEIANEIRA: CONTRAST AND COMPARISON

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As is normal with comparisons, one finds similarities and differences between works and writers. Ilango and Sophocles are both respected classical authors. The first may have lived, as tradition has, in the 5th c. A.D.[1], and Sophocles lived between 496-406 B.C. in Athens. Similarities, in general, may be due to a common origin or to structural reasons, or less probably, to direct influence. For the given period, a direct influence is difficult to prove and should better be left out of the scope of the present investigation.[2]

Is the Cilappatikāram a tragedy?[3] This is the idea that made Chellappan to undertake a long study. One would have Cilappatikāram for an epic poem, yet an analysis in terms of tragedy seems possible. Reading the Tamil epic one definitely has the feeling of a very good composition, the kind one may experience when reading Shakespeare or following him on stage. The series of meetings of Kannagi and Kovalan on their way to Madurai e.g. is not a chance chain of events, it is carefully composed.

If we try to compare the story told by Ilango and look for a Greek counterpart, the most obvious case is perhaps Sophocles, and not necessarily with only one of his works.[4] Here we intend to have a look at The Women of Trachis where an opposition in the sense of Kannagi and her renowned Greek counterpart Antigone is not operative, but certainly, the tragic fate is present: Kannagi opposed the king as if possessed by divine force, and – with regard to the force of prophecy – the parallel is striking. Like Deianeira, Kannagi too, admits her guilt immediately before she dies. This recognition (one would call it an anagnoresis in Greek terms) is due to the information given by the Goddess of Madurai[5] after the great fire, that Kannagi, in her previous life, cursed someone who

happened to be her husband in her present life. The previous man was Bharathan who mistook a businessman with the name Sangaman for a spy killing him. His wife, Neeli, from whom the curse came, was reborn as Kannagi.[6] The force of fate is perfect and inevitable: Kannagi followed Kovalan to the otherworld. As Chellappan pointed out repeatedly, and as is also evident in ancient dramas and other literary genres, the cosmic element is always present. Cosmos and nature are seen through the human consciousness. If the universe is to be affected this happens by human acts. If there is an oracle that Madurai will be burnt it is related to a human act: the gods need the humans for the fulfillment of the divine law (cf. Chellappan 1985: 98).

Deianeira, in Sophocles' play, who has hitherto been as patient as Greek tradition demanded of a husband's infidelities, - and as patient, we may add, as also Kannagi always was - feels now being asked too much. She will not harm Iole, for she recognizes that love is all-powerful. But it is lawful to win Herakles back by a spell. The Centaur Nessus, who once fell upon her, assured her in dying that his blood would be potent for such a purpose. She therefore secretly putsit on a new garment which she sends to her husband. But Herakles is horribly attacked by the poison (i.e. Nessus did not tell the woman the truth that his blood was venomous). Deianeira, cursed by her son Hyllos as his father's murderer, goes silently out, and her nurse appears shortly after that to say that she has killed herself (cf. Rose 1950: 167-168).

Fate, naturally, is a key concept both with regard to Greek dramas and as a link between Indian and Greek literary works. To the Aristotelian key concept, hamartia, a tragic error, i.e. not necessarily deliberate and of which the culprit was not necessarily conscious, fate or destiny could be paralleled, a notion, indeed, very familiar in Greek tradition. There are two important words for fate in Greek: moira and peprōmenon. The first seems to be more ancient (having to do with the noun meros 'part, share'); the second has a more dynamic aspect. Fate is something that superior powers like gods assign to mortals. Fate in this sense, explains what happened to Kovalan and Kannagi since this was the effect of the

curse by Neeli on Bharathan: a tragic, unwanted error, which led, in their new life, to the logical fulfilment.

With regard to hamartia, there is more explicitness in Deianeira's case than in Kannagi's, though, Kannagi too, admits her guilt immediately before she dies. This recognition (one would call it an anagnoresis in Greek terms) is due to the information given by the Goddess of Madurai[7] after the great fire, that Kannagi, in her previous life, cursed someone who happened to be her husband in her present life. The previous man was Bharathan who mistook a businessman with the name Sangaman for a spy killing him. His wife, Neeli, from whom the curse came, was reborn as Kannagi.[8] The force of fate is perfect and inevitable: Kannagi followed Kovalan to the other world. As Chellappan pointed out repeatedly, and as is also evident in ancient dramas and other literary genres, the cosmic element is always present. Cosmos and nature are seen through the human consciousness. If the universe is to be affected this happens by human acts. If there is an oracle that Madurai will be burnt it is related to a human act: the gods need the humans for the fulfillment of the divine law (cf. Chellappan 1985: 98).

There is a beautiful discussion about fate in the Indian tradition by Bharat Gupt (2006) who exemplifies the issue by the case of the Śakuntalā. Like in Greek, several terms correspond to the concept, the most familiar of which is perhaps daiva. Gupt underlines the superiority of fate that is accepted as unalterable (2006: 53.215216.230).[9]

Anagnoresis, too, could be paralled with Indian concepts. There is, however, a difference between Gupt (2006: 116.218-219) and Choubey, who suggests for correspondence the term vibodha or "awakening" (1997: 50).

An Indian equivalent to catharsis could be rasa, a word found already in the Vedas. There is a rather long semantic development not to be followed up here[10] with a late equivalent as 'aesthetic emotion' (Chaitanya 1977: 23). The overall positive connotations of the word could explain that "Later aesthetic theory [...] approximated the bliss of aesthetic experience to this transcendental experience" (Chaitanya ib.). Gupt dedicated a long

chapter to The Rasa Concept (2006: 260274), and Chellappan arrives at the conclusion that "In the action of Cilappatikāram we have the overall effect of stillness in motion. In structure a dome-like harmony is built out of the parts, and these are parallel to the concept of rasa, the artistic rendering of a pure [...] emotion purged of existential dross" (1985: 124). Indeed, it is still possible to go further: following K.N. Subramanyam, śānti (literally 'peace') is considered as 'the final rasa, the rasa of rasas", and Chellappan agrees with the view that Ilango aims at śānti (ib.). Personally I would ask: is there, perhaps, anything still deeper since śānti has also the - semantically quite understandable - meaning 'extinction (of fire)'?[11]

Summarizing his analysis, Bharat Gupt, in the chapter "Katharsis and Rasa" (2006: 272-273), represents these concepts as the two extremities of the same line. The first may be looked upon as a prerequisite for the manifestation of rasa. According to him, the Indian concept includes in its ambit the process of catharsis. Catharsis is a restorative process; it frees the spectator of emotional imbalance. The doctrine of rasa focuses on the final state of unmixed delight. This makes them s"two ends of the same spectrum".[12]

If we have a look at Sophocles' most famous play, the Antigone, perhaps one more parallel can be established: Antigone's motives were those of nature (physis), cf. divine law, and the king's motives were those of law (nomos), i.e. the legislation of a tyrant who gave "law" against nature. In the Athenian democracy of that time this was understood with a special sensibility because the famous Periclean democracy maintained that written and unwritten law were the same thing, and consequently no contradicting individual and institutional law existed. A possible parallel between Greek (but not valid for Deianeira) and Tamil tradition, would be that according to Chellappan (1985: 123), rasa is reflected in the symmetrical structure of the Tamil epic and Kannagi emerges as a symbol of the deeper unity of Tamil Nadu (Puharkkandam, the Puhar chapter, Maduraikkandam, the Madurai chapter, and Vanchikkandam, the Vanchi chapter), indeed, for that world, the entire humanity. Antigone preferred to kill herself for

the divine law which was thought to be the same as that of the city which happened to be the most important in whole Greece. What she did for her brother was done also for her city and her native land. She united divine and human sphere. Kreon, the tyrant king cursed himself and lost his sight, his son and wife committed suicide. This was not only nemesis, a divine vengeance, this was also a catharsis. The Women of Trachis has no such depths but the divine element and the katharsis are present: indeed many scholars remarked that Herakles' burning on the pyre was a means to get rid of mortal remains so that he is assumed to the gods.[13] One further component of katharsis is the fire: fire plays a purifying role in most ancient civilizations, especially in the Greek and the Indian one. Fire is the first word in the grandiose corpus of the Rig Veda Hymns. It is personified there as a Hotṛ, i.e. a (household) priest.[14] Herakles is also a link between the Indo-European concept of warrior and the Greek type of hero. This link gives a further dimension for connecting the Indian and the Greek tradition, which however, is not part of the present discussion.

References

1. "A date around A.D. 450 would be most appropriate for Cil." (Zvelebil 1975: 114). This paper cannot contribute to the question of creating and dating Cilappatikāram. With regard to the date of The Trachiniae, it is argued that the date is uncertain, even unknown, or certainly not early (Rose 1950: 167); Laurin suggests 431 B.C. (2008: 75.77).

2. Introducing the large literature either on Sophocles or on The Trachiniae cannot be undertaken here. Some of the basic readings are the following: Dain – Mazon (1962), Davis (1991), Kamerbeek (1970), Levett (2004), Lloyd- Jones (1994), Masqueray (1929), Storr (1968). With regard to Tamil, its works in original and translations, are accessible. One may have a look, e.g. at the bibliographies given in Samuel – Thiagarajan (2010), or more generally, at the activity of the Institute of Asian Studies (IAS) founded in 1982. There is also a huge project under the title The Encyclopedia of Tamil Literature, started by the IAS in 1990 (mentioned by A. Dubyansky in Samuel – Thiagarajan, 2010: 86). As a precious contribution is considered the survey by Vaiyapuripillai (1988) who not only analyzes the Cilappatikāram (pp. 100-114) but also surveys the Greek testimonies to early Tamil history and literature (pp. 12-17).

3. Kailasapathy calls it "a literary epic" (twice), and a "post-Heroic epic" (once) (2002: 43.128; and 109). In his research on epic, he also discusses

the Greek Evidence. p. 69 ff. (on Singers and Patrons), and p. 198 ff. (on Themes and Cycles)

4. Cf., however, Chellappan (2010) who takes recourse in his study, to Aeschylus (discussing e.g. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra) and Sophocles (discussing e.g. Antigone)

5. e.e. the Madurāpati Goddess (cf. Chellappan 1985: 104).

6. Cf. Karthik's analysis (2008: 108)

7. e.e. the Madurāpati Goddess (cf. Chellappan 1985: 104).

8. Cf. Karthik's analysis (2008: 108)

9. One feels corroborated oneself in interpreting the force of fate when thinking of the etymology of the name "Deianeira", especially when remembering the case of Kannagi. Names are always an indication. "Deianeira" derives from the adjective dēïos 'inimical, terrible', said of 'fire'; and the designation, with a verbal reinterpretation of the first member means 'killing the man', with a double entendre, of course, to "fire". The name Deianeira has been created after nouns like "antianeira", "kydianeira" (cf. DELG 271, Beekes 2010: 323).

10. The word is not to be separated from Latin rōs 'dew, dew-drop', found also in Lithuanian as rasà and Old Church Slavonian as rosa with the meaning 'dew' (EWAia II 552). Chantraine would not exclude a connection with Greek drosos 'dew' (DELG 299). The word still exists in Modern Greek, and droseros, means today 'cool, fresh'.

11. See MacDonell (1999: 311) for equivalents like 'mental tranquillity, peace of mind; extinction (of fire); cessation' etc.

12. Choubey's analysis (1997), based on the Oedipus, gives more dimensions of rasa that, however, cannot be followed up here.

13. See e.g. the discussion by Edsman (1949: 233-249). One should also remember that Herakles, the most popular Greek hero, was, according to the myth, a demi-god: son of Zeus and Alkmene. It was his fate to return to the gods.

14. Cf. "pray to Agni, the household priest who is the god of sacrifice" (Doniger 1981: 99).

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