

Representation of Non-Human Beings as an Integral Part of Human Culture in the *Kuruntokai* poems written by Chēramān Pālai Pādiya Perunkadunkō

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Abstract

Humans and non-humans had a harmonious relationship during the Sangam Age in Tamil Nadu. Non-human beings were considered a part of the household, or at least, integral to their society. This is evident in the way plants and animals are mentioned in the *Kuruntokai* poems. Chēramān Pālai Pādiya Perunkadunkō's poems in particular are filled with images of animals and plants that are used to describe not just the state of mind of the human characters but also the external landscape. This essay analyses the role played by non-human beings in the domestic life of the Tamils in the Sangam Age and establishes that domestic life in the Sangam Age was essentially a co-existence of human and non-human beings.

Introduction

In the history of Tamil Literature, the Sangam age is considered to be the golden age of Literature. Sangam literature serves as the best of the best in the classical period and also simultaneously the best of new ideas which are written in the modern era. *Kuruntokai* occupies a special place in the Sangam Literature. Written in short stanzas, *Kuruntokai* perfectly portrays the domestic life of the Tamils living in the Sangam Age.

In the history of our Earth, numerous species of plants and animals have evolved and have become extinct without leaving a trace. It is a sad truth that modern humans are so involved in the pursuit of their happiness that they do not have time to spend time to care for and to ensure that non-human beings continue to live undisturbed on earth. This was not the case in the Sangam Age where humans considered animals to be a part of their life and they spent time caring for them and preserving them.

People in the Sangam Age did not wish to change the environment to their comfort but they rather strove to adapt themselves to their environment. In Sangam Literature, it is evident that Birds, Bear, Elephant, Cuckoo, Parrot, Eagle, Beetle, Stork, Deer, Fish, numerous species of trees, plants and creepers were an integral part of the family life of the people living in the Sangam Age.

Animals

Lizard

When the heroine is wondering if her loved one (the hero) who has traveled abroad to work and acquire wealth will be remembering her that night or be too occupied with his business, the heroine's friend tells her that she has just heard the male lizard wooing the female lizard and that it is a premonition that her loved one will return soon for her and that he is indeed longing for her.

“Land filled with cacti, he passes.

In it, a red lizard to his mate addresses

Now, like bandit's sharp arrows, they speak

Clicking and reminding him to seek

Your hand, after his wealth he amasses.” (*Kuruntokai* 16, translated by Andrew Veda)

The lizard's cry is used as an intricate metaphor and it indicates that the lizard was a part of the household, that is to say, the lizards lived in the same house with the heroine and also refers to the

wild lizards living in the strange land the hero is travelling in. The distinction between the wild lizards in the desert and the lizards that live in the houses is blurred.

Elephant

When the heroine is anxiously waiting for her beloved to come back to her, her friend assures her with a long metaphor drawn from their knowledge acquired on a daily basis with the animals that are a part of their domestic life. The friend tells the heroine about an elephant couple who are so bound by love that the male elephant which has a huge trunk will break the tender branches of trees and give it to his mate who is hungry. The female elephant is thus fed with the sweet, cool liquid from the branches which have been given so thoughtfully by the male elephant. The heroine is thus assured by her friend that her lover will also come to her and give her such great comfort.

“Lady, his love for you engulfs him full.

In the jungle, an elephant bull

Neatly strips off delicious barks

Care and love, like our hero marks.

Yā trees she feasts on, all will be well!” (Kuruntokai 37, translated by Andrew Veda)

“In elephant footprint puddles that seem

New sugarcane fields we plant” (Kuruntokai 262, translated by Andrew Veda)

In another poem, the heroine’s friend tells the heroine of the pleasures she will get when she goes to a foreign land with her lover by way of an extended metaphor using elephants. Large bull elephants who walk in the jungle leave depressions on the ground in which rainwater is collected. This water resembles the water in sugarcane fields after eating gooseberries that will make the sharp teeth shine. This example mentions elephants not just in passing but also describes the habitat of the elephants too. It is contrasted with the domesticity of human settlement (sugarcane fields) which is also frequented by elephants.

Tiger

The lover who had departed to foreign land in search of wealth, leaving the lady love behind, has come back with great wealth. He is welcomed by the heroine and her friend. The hero tells the lady of the great love with which he had pined away for her when he had been away.

“Cubs and their tigress prowl below

Yet not these did my thoughts befriend.” (Kuruntokai 209, translated by Andrew Veda)

A tigress who has just given birth to tiger cubs will be eagerly awaiting prey to feed herself and her cubs. This desire for food which the tigress has is shared by the hero who pines for the comfort of the woman he has left behind at home. The hero who traveled this path where the tigress hunts does not care about his personal safety as his thoughts are all occupied by his lady love whose hair smells like the newly budded *Vetchi* flowers that are in the forest.

Fish

The heroine is comforted by her friend who is longing for her lover who compares her eyes to a fish. The heroine, like all other women who wait for their lovers to come back home, spend the evenings weeping and that their tears muddy their eyes which is shaped like a *kayyal meen* (carp).

“Listen, my dear, this evening tires me

In this cold rains, can I find no glee

Nods our heavy earrings slow

Carp eyes long for him, our fingers show

Yet another lamp, the oil it wants, to glow!

Longing for him, my tears do fall

Inflamed, my muddied eyes do call

News of his return (I yearn)

Celebrating in joy, we burn

Yes, ecstasy and bliss, my body’ll learn!” (Kuruntokai 398, translated by Andrew Veda)

It is to be noted that the comparison of women’s eyes to carps (*kayyal meen*) is common in Tamil literature.

Kite

The heroine is depressed because her lover has gone to foreign lands in search of wealth, especially because of the dangers in those lands to the wellbeing of her lover who may face bandits and wayfarers who may kill him for his wealth.

**“Living long, he'll prosper, my friend!
Inheritances not willing to spend,
Name and wealth for himself, he'll gain
Not in idle shame, he'll work abstain.
Expert killers who like Kootruvan kill
Those travellers; whose wealth their coffers fill
The deserts where there's no water fresh**

Eager kites wait for their flesh!” (*Kuruntokai* 283, translated by Andrew Veda)

The reason as to why the hero has gone abroad, according to the heroine's friend, is that it is considered ignominious to live on the inheritance left for them by their ancestors and that wise men would applaud only those who earn or create their own wealth. Determined to live according to the ideal prescribed for young men, he has set off to strange lands without caring for his safety. The land which he is travelling is so different from their current landscape and that it is possible that it may be a desert where wayside bandits may target passersby and kill them like Kotruven with their sharp spears and leave his body for the hungry kites which are waiting to scavenge on the flesh of dead animals. This is the reason for her fear, says the heroine. The kites described here are outside the domestic sphere of the people in the Sangam age but since all young men were expected to travel to foreign lands to earn wealth, for them it is a bird whose habits were very familiar to them. Since the women in their life were always thinking of them, the women were also thinking constantly of the kites in the desert.

Plants

Ōmai Tree

*“You say that the wasteland
you have to pass through
is absence itself:
wide spaces where sometimes
salt merchants have gathered for a while
and gone, ōmai trees that stand
like ghost towns once busy with living.
But tell me really,
do you think that home will be sweet
for the ones you leave behind?”* (*Kuruntokai* 124, translated by AK Ramanujan)

The heroine's friend tells the hero that he should take the heroine on the trip with him as he thinks it is a painful journey, and that it is just as painful for her (the heroine) to be left alone at home as it will be extremely painful for her to be separated from him. The hero had suggested that it is very painful to cross the huge lands filled with Ōmai trees frequented mostly by salt merchants. The friend tells him that it will be just as painful for her.

Gooseberry

The heroine's friend tells the heroine that if she desires to live without suffering the pangs of separation then she should leave her house and the land she is living and to go to the hero's house which is in a different land. Only when they are living together can she be really happy as there will be no separation.

**“Loud uproar will rise in our street
In our town, the gossip elite!
Nagging mother left alone
Caring lover to whom you've flown
You'll find, with him, happiness sweet!
Land of tall mountains where you drink, I dream,
In elephant footprint puddles that seem
New sugarcane fields we plant
Chewing gooseberries, which will, I grant**

Your sharp teeth glitter and beam!” (*Kuruntokai* 262, translated by Andrew Veda) Gossip will arise in the town and possibly even an uproar in the streets when she decides to leave her mother who is unfair to her and to go and live with her lover. The friend tells her that it would be pleasant to live in a strange land and to drink water from the puddles created by elephants (as mentioned above). The extension of the metaphor of the elephants to compare with the domestic, familiar idea of the sweetness

of the gooseberries is apt as it strikes a perfect balance between domestic life and a life away from this familiar life.

Vetchi

The hero who has left his native land for acquiring wealth finds solace in the thoughts of the heroine whose hair smells like Vetchi flowers.

“Listen, thou, my beloved's friend!

In mountains, gooseberries from trees extend

New taste to our buds do show

Cubs and their tigress prowl below

Yet not these did my thoughts befriend.

Like the new buds of our vetchi flowers,

In fragrance does her hair send rich showers

Now, of the beautiful lady I speak

Camped in my thoughts and my strong physique.

You see how my love myself devours!” (*Kuruntokai* 209, translated by Andrew Veda)

The Vetchi flowers are used here not just for the smell but also because they are a symbol for the domestic life in his native land which he has just left behind. It becomes apparent that to be considered a symbol of domestic life, the Vetchi tree has to be part of the life of the people of the Sangam Era. It reminds the hero of his lady love and also the society that he has left behind.

Sugarcane

As mentioned above in *Kuruntokai* 262, the heroine's friend has a knowledge of the taste of gooseberries, which is part of their diet and also about the behaviour of the elephants in the forests. She also knows about the soil and water conditions required for the growth of sugarcane plants. “In elephant footprint puddles that seem / New sugarcane fields we plant” She talks about the sweetness of the water that has formed in the puddles left by elephants and says that they appear just like the water that is collected in the sugarcane fields. The foreign land which is being described here is made to be part of the familiar landscape by the use of the sugarcane metaphor. The idea that everything is connected, which is considered the first law of ecology, is applied in this poem.

Conclusion

Perunkadunkō, who is titled Chēramān Pālai Pādiya Perunkadunkō, is known for his Pālai poems. Even in *Kuruntokai*, he has written many Pālai poems. Only one of the poems is a Marudham Tinai poem. Only the Ōmai Tree is mentioned when talking about the desert. Plants are used in the similes and metaphors used to describe the external environment in the Pālai landscape which are classified as Mudhal, Kari and Uri Porul. Elephants, Tigers and Lizards are used in the similes and metaphors which are used to describe the state of mind of the heroine. Sugarcane which is a tree grown in the Marutham tinai is also used in a Pālai poem. This is used only when describing the water in the puddles created by elephants which are very similar to the puddles in sugarcane fields. They are not used merely as a comparison but to connect both the natural and the cultural world. All the animal and plant imagery discussed in this essay illustrate that a strong link existed between humans and non-humans in the Sangam Age.

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