



The Tragedy of Greek Dramas and the *Kaiyarunilai* of Sangam Literature: Concordance and Differences

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I. INTRODUCTION

The human emotion of tragedy is the foundational chord of art forms. Famous works of classical literature are structured around tragic endings. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* are the finest tragic plays. In the Sangam literature, *Palaihinai* (desert landscape) songs are the most abundant. The proliferation of tragic literature is the result of man's attempt to experience suffering not subjectively but objectively as an observer.

The tragic endings of Greek plays have been praised by literary critics worldwide. In the Tamil Sangam literary collection, the *Kaiyarunilai* (state of helplessness/despair) songs are equivalent to such tragic endings. Therefore, this article comparatively examines the tragedy featured in Greek tragic plays such as the *Iliad*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Agamemnon*, and *The Trojan Women*, and the Sangam-era *Kaiyarunilai* songs at certain points. The concordances and differences obtained through such comparisons are presented in the conclusion.

II. CLASSICAL LITERATURES AND TRAGEDY

The relationship between classical fiction and tragedy is deeply interconnected. For this reason, classical literary texts remain capable of being reread time and again. Italo Calvino gives the following three answers to the question of why one should read the classics:

- Every rereading of a classic is as much a voyage of discovery as the first reading.
- Every reading of a classic is in fact a rereading.
- A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say to its readers.

(Italo Calvino, *Why Read the Classics?* Translated into Tamil by Brahmarajan.

Tamil sociological researcher K. Kailasapathy states that heroic poetry worldwide possesses common elements. Among them, cataloguing (listing) and lamentation for the dead are primary. The listing of the names of a thousand ship captains coming to the city of Troy in the *Iliad*, and the listing of ninety-nine varieties of flowers in *Kurinchippattu* are not coincidental events.

This must be understood through Kailasapathy's statement. His research thesis, *Tamil Heroic Poetry*, proposes this. He states that wrath and prolonged lamentation are also common elements of heroic poetry. (K. Kailasapathy, *Tamil Heroic Poetry*, p. 39). Marxist sociology holds that the mode of production of a given economy explains the universality of heroic poetry across the world. Thus, the abundance of the tragic element in classical literary texts is closely related to the economic production of that era.

This article attempts to compare and describe tragedy, which is the primary element of such heroic poetry.

Tragedy is an inevitable element in the classical epic tradition. As a socio-philosophical stance for the formation of tragedy in literature, Christopher Caudwell views poetry and epic as the contradiction between human desire and nature's necessity. He defines it as follows:

There is a contradiction between man's desire and Nature's necessity. Poetry springs from the contradiction between the instincts and experience of the poet. The tension drives him to build the world of illusory phantasy which yet has a definite and functional relation to the real world of which it is blossom.

He states that poetry arises from the conflict between human desire and the demands of the realistic world. This is also why the tragic element appears in the epic.

III. THE GREEK TRAGIC TRADITION

Greek plays have been available since the 600s BC. The tragic plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides are famous. Aeschylus is considered the starting point of Greek tragedy. This article uses Euripides' Greek tragedy *The Trojan Women* and Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex* for this study.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote *The Birth of Tragedy*, a book about the origins of Greek tragedy. In this, Nietzsche analyses the trends of Greek tragic plays by comparing them with two Greek deities: Apollo and Dionysus. These two deities, Apollo and Dionysus, possess contradictory natures.

Will Durant points out how Nietzsche explains the difference between Dionysus and Apollo as follows:

Dionysus (or Bacchus), the god of wine and revelry, of ascending life, of joy in action, of ecstatic emotion and inspiration, of instinct and adventure and dauntless suffering, the god of song and music and dance and drama; - and then, later, Apollo, the god of peace and leisure and repose, of esthetic emotion and intellectual contemplation, of logical order and philosophic calm, the god of painting and sculpture and epic poetry. The noblest Greek art was a union of the two ideals, - the restless masculine power of Dionysus and the quiet feminine beauty of Apollo. In drama Dionysus inspired the chorus, and Apollo the dialogue.

(Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, P.441 & 442).

As Nietzsche says, Greek drama consists of two elements. One is song, and the other is dialogue. In ancient Greece, the song was associated with the deity Dionysus and the dialogue with Apollo. That is, they pleased Apollo through the dialogue in the play. They pleased Dionysus through the song. There is a tradition in Greek theatrical convention that further sharpens this contradiction, presenting Apollo as feminine and soft and Dionysus as masculine. Therefore, in drama, the dialogue was designated male, and the choral song (chorus) was designated female.

Two distinctive features of Greek plays can be stated:

- Each character acted wearing appropriate masks.
- The harmony and contradiction between the characters in the plays and the choruses that are sung.

The nature of the chorus, responding like a wise sage to the character's dialogue as the play progresses, is important. This mask worn by the characters is called Persona. From this, the modern psychologist Carl Jung developed the psychological concept of the mask of human behaviour, called the Persona. His teacher and friend, Sigmund Freud, developed modern psychological theories from *Oedipus Rex* and the character Narcissus. Hence, Greek classical literature created a massive impact on modern psychology. In literature, too, the influence of Greek tragedy extended up to Thomas Kyd (*The Spanish Tragedy*) and Shakespeare's plays.

IV. TAMIL KAIYARUNILAI SONGS

Tolkappiyar explains sorrow as one of the eight physical manifestations of emotions (*Meippadu*). He places crying (*Azhugai*) second, stating "*Laughter and Crying*". The commentator Naccinarkkiniyar says regarding this:

Crying means grieving; it occurs as shedding tears and suffering sorrow. Crying that comes due to the trouble that happens to oneself is crying out of pain. Crying that comes due to the trouble that happens to others is crying out of pity.

(*Tol. Meippattiyal*, Naccinarkkiniyar's commentary).

Tolkappiyar says crying comes from four types of reasons:

Ilive, Izhave, Asaive, Varumai (Sutra No. 253)

Ilivu - when spoken of disparagingly;

Izhavu - during loss;

Asaivu - when one's state changes to something else;

Varumai - when seeing a loss in wealth. Among these, the sorrow caused by loss is known as Greek tragedy and as *Kaiyarunilai* in Tamil.

Tolkappiyar explains the literary theme (Turai) called *Kaiyarunilai* by placing it under the *Kanchithinai* category. That is, the term *Kaiyarunilai* appears in the 79th sutra of *Purathinai*.

Kazhinthor theeth thazhipadarurii,

Ozhinthor pulambiya kaiyaru nilaiyum

(*Tolkappiyam*, Porul, Sutra No. 79)

It can be defined as the state of crying in which others feel loneliness toward those who have passed away. Naccinarkkiniyar gives the following meaning to this line:

When wives pass away along with their husbands, informing others of all the loss of meaning they suffered... the helpless state of suffering immense individual sorrow. (*Tol. Purathinaiyiyal*, p. 276).

Since it is *Kanchithinai*, Naccinarkkiniyar gives an explanation suited for *Kanchithinai*. Not only that, but Naccinarkkiniyar also divides *Kaiyarunilai* into two distinct types: Male *Kaiyarunilai* and Female *Kaiyarunilai*.

This can be defined as the state of standing helpless, not knowing what to do. The Tamil Lexicon defines it as:

The *Puram* (exterior) poetic theme that speaks of the extreme sorrow and helplessness of the attendants and others due to the death of the hero or the heroine.

(Tamil Lexicon, Vol. 6. 1123).

In the Sangam literature, a total of 41 *Kaiyarunilai* songs are found in *Purananuru* alone. These can be considered the tragic songs of the Sangam era.



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V. TRAGEDY: EPIC UNIVERSALITY

Dr K. Chellappan, who explains *Silappatikaram*, Shakespeare, and Ilango as the greatest tragic playwrights, shows that tragic plays have evolved into a distinct form in world literature and that epic and tragedy have a fundamental, inseparable relationship.

Therefore we would not be wrong if we come to the conclusion that the distinction between epic and Tragedy is not fundamental or universal, at least they are not exclusive in all cultures.

(Dr. K. Chellappan, *Shakespeare and Ilango as Tragedians*, P.No.8).

This tragedy, inherent to all cultures, is fully realised in both individual poems and plays. Sangam literature consists of individual poems, but if asked whether they can be compared with Greek plays, the answer is inevitably yes: dramatic elements are inevitably inherent in the individual poems.

An individual poem and an epic will both become drama at a certain point. That itself is the best poetic function, says the Sanskrit Kavya Subhashita. It says “*Nadagantham Kavithvam*” (Poetry ends in drama). Similarly, the Sanskrit literary commentator Abhinavagupta says, “*Kavyam Ka Natya Eva*” (Epic indeed turns into drama). Therefore, epic and drama do not differ in the way they express tragedy.

VI. POST-WAR LAMENTATION

One can hear the lamentation over the post-war destruction in *The Trojan Women*. The Trojan War comes to an end. Following that, Euripides has created the women’s wailing cries of that city as a separate epic. His *The Trojan Women* is a complete tragic play made of their cries. Hecuba is the wife of Priam, the king of Troy. She is the queen of the city of Troy. Homer has created an immortal epic from her lament for the death of her eldest son, Hector, in the *Iliad*. In this play, she cries for her city of Troy. After the Greeks destroy the city of Troy, she laments as follows:

Alas! Alas! Alas! Ilion is ablaze;

The fire consumes the citadel, the roofs of our city,
the tops of the walls!

Her wailing voice intensifies, and she rants as follows:

This is not Troy. Troy is gone.

I am Queen of Troy, queen of nothing. (100-101)

Hecuba’s voice echoing in this way resembles the *Kaiyarunilai* of Pari’s daughters, as it arises in the Sangam literature. The daughters of Pari, after the death of Pari, the king of the Parambu hill, sing:

On that day’s month under that white moonlight
we possessed our father; and others did not seize
our hill.

On this day’s month under this white moonlight
kings with victorious beating drums
have seized our hill, and we do not have our father
either.

(*Purananuru* Song No. 112)

This song is categorised under the poetic theme of *Kaiyarunilai*, within the Pothuviyal landscape. The state of helplessness in the fact that the hill and the father we once had are now no more stands in its final lines. Specifically, one can observe the ‘*Ekara*’ ending (suffix ‘e’) unique to the *Asiriyappa* meter, which transforms into tragedy in meaning.

There are many instances in Sangam-era songs where the cruel face of war is revealed. The 7th song of *Purananuru* says that Karikal Chola set fire to and destroyed his enemies’ villages. *Pattinappalai* mentions that fertile agricultural fields were destroyed (*Pattinappalai*, 240-245).

All over the world, those greatly affected by war are children and women. Therefore, it is also noteworthy that the Belgian writer Peter Verhelst wrote this play, *The Trojan Women*, as a modern retelling poem under the title *What could have been us*. This poem is also considered the finest anti-war poem of the twentieth century.

VII. WAR AND WRATH

War is an action undertaken by states; this is also defined as State Violence. Destroying an enemy country through war is also a common occurrence in Greek and Tamil classical literature. The 4th song of *Purananuru* says that an enemy nation suffering destruction will cry out incessantly in sorrow, much like a motherless child crying relentlessly out of hunger.

Thayin thoovaa kuzhavi pola

Ovaathu koo-um, nin udattiriyor naade (*Puram*. 4)

While Parananar sings the praises of the Chola king Ilamcetcenni, he says the enemy country becomes like this.

The pain of a country consumed by fire is sung not only in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* but also in Aeschylus’s play *Agamemnon*. The play *Agamemnon* is written from the perspective of the Greek king Agamemnon, who destroyed Troy.

Helen is the queen of Sparta. She is the daughter of Zeus. She is the wife of Menelaus. After Paris, the prince of the city of Troy, abducts her, Menelaus sets out with his younger brother *Agamemnon* to rescue her. He is the king of the city of Mycenae. Returning home after ten years of the Trojan War, he is murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra. Aeschylus sings of this tragedy. This is a massive, tragic play composed of 1773 lines.

Upon returning home after destroying the city of Troy for Helen, *Agamemnon* is killed by his wife, Clytemnestra. *Agamemnon* had offered his own daughter, Iphigenia, as a divine sacrifice to the war. Therefore, bearing wrath for that, Clytemnestra takes revenge.

He fell and he died among us;
among us he will find due burial, though not our tears.
At Acheron Iphigeneia will appear;
she'll greet him as her father, lovingly;
her healing embrace will restore the stolen years.
(*Agamemnon* 1555-15)

In this, the king is avenged and killed. His wife, who killed him, celebrates his death without guilt. They say Clytemnestra is the prototype for Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, a ruthless woman. (The situation arises where the king is buried without tears). Regarding Lady Macbeth.

VIII. KAIYARUNILAI OCCURRING DUE TO DEATH

Besides war, one can find *Kaiyarunilai* songs in the Sangam literature about the loss of a person. That is, they show the pain of loss. The song sung by Kudavayil Kirattanar about Perunsathan is situated in *Purananuru* 242. In this,

The youth will not pluck flowers; the bangle-wearing women will not wear them;
the *Panan* (bard), gently pulling the sweet-sounding *Yazh* instrument's stem,
will not wear them; the *Padini* (songstress) will not adorn herself;
After the demise of Valvel Sathan (Sathan of the strong spear),
O Jasmine, have you too blossomed in this Ollaiyur country? (*Puram*. 242)

Saying, "*O Jasmine, there is no use in your blooming today*," the poet presents the state of *Kaiyarunilai* resulting from the death of Valvel Sathan.

Due to the king's death, the *Padini*, *Panan*, and the youth give up decorating themselves with flowers. Observing such mourning is also visualised in the *Iliad*.

After Hector's death, the prince of Troy, the war is halted for a few days to observe mourning and perform rituals. As soon as Achilles drags Hector's body tied to his chariot, his father Priam goes without anyone's knowledge, begs pitifully, and gets the body back. In the conversation that takes place there between King Priam and Achilles, this truce is decided. For the separation of Hector, his mother Hecuba laments as follows:

Hector thou knowst or else thy soule doth know
For thou alas art Hector now no more, (*Iliad*, 6.1123.)

Before Hector goes to fight Achilles directly, face-to-face, all alone, he first sees the women of the city of Troy, then his mother, then his brother Paris, and his lover Helen, who is the cause of this war. Even today, critics write thousands of pages of commentary on why Hector finally looked at Helen. Such is the powerful sorrow. Homer brings the tragedy from this final glance of Hector.

IX. LIFE DIRECTED BY FATE

In Greek tragedy, the primary cause of tragedy is fate and the Oracle, the prophecy that predicts what is to come. In *Oedipus the King*, the very first scene begins with listening to the Delphic oracle. They ask what should be done to cure the plague disease. At that time, the oracle's word says that those who killed the king named Laius must be killed, which is why such a deadly disease is roaming around.

Even though *Oedipus Rex* struggles throughout the play to escape the fate that he will marry his own mother, he unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother, Jocasta. Therefore, at the end of the play, he blinds his eyes and dies.

He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance
he rose to power, a man beyond all power.
Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him.
Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day
count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.

(*Oedipus Rex*, Lines. 1679-1683)



The final part of *Oedipus the King* shows that no matter how intelligently he tries, he must perish within the riddle of fate. However, in Tamil *Kaiyarunilai* scenes, there is no lamentation regarding fate. Instead, blaming the Creator exists.

In one house the death drum sounds, in one house the rhythm of the cool, moist drum overflows; truly, the one who created this is an uncultured person. (*Puram*. 194)

Even in *Tirukkural*, the voice blaming the Creator gains strength, stating, “*May the creator of this world wander and perish*”. Since such impermanence exists, those who realise its nature will see the sweet things, with which this *Purananuru* poem concludes. This is the primary area where the Tamil tradition differs from the Greek tragic method of creation.

X. INTERVENTION OF GOD

The intervention of God is primary in Greek epics; specifically, Achilles, who sets out to destroy the city of Troy, is the child of a god. Many of those involved in the Trojan War are gods. Although the Trojan War was fought over Helen, the three goddesses who conducted it were Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. Homer’s epics, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Greek epic *Agamemnon*, and the epic *The Trojan Women* are all based on the Trojan War. These are the reasons for the tragedy that occurred there. Therefore, the action of the gods is primary in Greek classical literature. However, in the Sangam literary texts, the space for gods is very minimal. Kings fought wars merely for land and gold. It can be said that those are what brought about the tragedy.

In the Sangam texts, one sees only falling on the battlefield due to wars between kings and the *Kaiyarunilai* that resulted from them. In the song sung by Avvaiyar for Adhiyaman:

He who was a support to my father, is he still alive?

Now there are no singers; and there are none to give anything to the singers. (*Puram*. 235)

This lamentation shows the state of the leader being gone and the sorrow that there is no one left to give anything to the performing artists.

XI. CONCLUSION

This article presents a bird’s-eye view of how the universal human emotion of tragedy is depicted in Greek and Sangam literatures. In people’s lives, war and the sorrow it brings have become a great tragedy. The state of the gods and fate play major roles in the Greek epic tradition. In the Tamil Sangam-era poetic tradition, there is a tendency to view death and sorrow as part of life. Death is not new (*Saathalum puthuvathu andre*), this world is not sweet (*Innnaathu amma ivvulagam*), it is an impermanent world (*Manna ulagam*)—these demonstrate the differing ethics of the ancient Tamil tradition.

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