Chapter-7

Tamil Thinai Poetics and Irish Poetry

In the previous chapter, the western modern memeplex theory has been applied to highlight the continuity of quest motif as ‘culture conscious’ linked with nature objects, derived from Irish literary tradition, in the poems of Yeats, Heaney and Muldoon. And, using the ancient Tamil thinai poetics, the present chapter attempts to bring out the role-play of Irish space and place, as images derived from Irish landscape, in the poems of these poets.

The ancient Tamil literature has considerably contributed to the eco-friendly literary theory in the name of thinai poetics. The ancient Cankam poets, who belong to pre-Christian era, termed as Cankam poets because of their association with literary academies of those days were remarkably successful in nurturing their creative minds with the elements of landscape, which they belonged to. They drew their creative energy from the space that nature had provided for everyone. They believed that poetry is means of communication and the images and metaphors in their poems evolve from the natural subjects that may be studied as cultural objects. These objects always locate the poet’s self in his traditional as well as social space.

The organic element in Cankam/Thinai poetics of ancient Tamil literary tradition is structurally meaningful and conventionally intelligible. Any reader who is familiar with Tamil poetic tradition could figure out the poem particularly the ideas literally stated. The tradition has divided the meaning of a poem into a three-tier revelation. The third verse of Akathinai Iyal in Tholkappiam, the Tamil grammatical treatise, suggests, “considering the literary usage of, Mutalporul, Karupporul and Uripporul are the three
important constituents by which the thinai of a poem is determined” (Porulathikaram of Tholkappiam 5). First one, being the meaning external (Muthalporul), the second, the inner meaning or the meaning internal (Karupporul) and the third, the meaning deduced (Uripporul). The landscape and time element in the poem belong to the first category. ‘The human and non-human objects including flora and fauna reveal the second type of meaning. And, the cumulative mind and disposition of character are passed on to the reader by the third one’ (R. Balachandran 55). Sometime the meaning is read by imagery and metaphor that are not decorative but are meaningful units, mostly facilitating the meaning by a process of suggestion. For instance, a poem from Cankam age reads thus:

The bare root of the bean is pink
like the leg of a jungle hen.
and herds of deer attack its overripe pods.
For the harshness
of this season of morning dew
there is no cure

but the breast of my man (Kurunthokai 68 Tr. A.K.Ramanujam 243).

Ramanujam comments that the season is morning dew (kurinci), but the bird mentioned is a jungle hen (mullai) and the beast is a deer (mullai).(Tamil thinai poetics divides the landscape into five regions, namely Kurinci- hills, mullai-forest, marutham- fertile fields, neithal- seascape and palai- desert. In the poem, “the mixture of kurinci (lover’s union) and mullai (patient waiting) brings out effectively the exact nuance of the girl’s mood”(243).
In this process, nature plays a vital role to define the cultural heritage of any society. As Xavier Thani Nayagam states, the division of earth into five types of land or region was fundamental to the development of Tamil culture. Also, he explains:

The concept of nature and the poetry, which resulted from this concept, offer an interesting area of comparative study of the ancient world. The Chinese, the Indians, the Greeks and the Romans had each characteristic aspects of outlook regarding Nature, which affected their poetry. Very often, such poetry was conditioned by the landscape within which it originated (83).

The Celts can also be included in the list. Certainly, Celtic traditional elements from their ritual to landscape poetry are deeply rooted in Irish soil. Hence, thinai poetics help the researcher to study how the cultural habits and ritual practices are connected to the landscape poetry of Yeats, Heaney and Paul Muldoon.

The places in Yeats’ poems, like Sligo, Coole, lady Gregory’s castle and Heaney’s Mosssbawn and bogland, and Muldoon’s re-creation of Northern Ireland’s “Armagh to Tyrone, Fermanagh and county Derry are spaces that emerge as meaningful units and they are inseparable from the minds of the poets as they never be removed from the landscape of Ireland. Among the culturally associated natural names of the places, Derry finds its role in the history of the struggle for Irish Independence. They are not simply names of places but culture markers that have an immediate reference to the political history of Ireland. They can also be labeled as ‘identity spaces’ of Irish politics. Yeats’ birthplace, Sligo, provides him an elaborate landscape as a background to his poetry. The picturesque land including the three-tier symbolism is expanded into his mind as space-imagery. T.R. Henn describes how Sligo is set as a background to Yeats’ poetry:
Sligo town lies in a cup of the hills, where a short but broad river takes the waters of lough Gill into the Atlantic. As you stand facing the sea, there are two mountains: knockharea on the left hand with a tumulus on the summit, said to be Queen Maeve’s grave, and called in the Irish Ard-na-riagadh, the Hill of the Scaffolds. (There are many ancient graves on the north and east slopes, as well as prehistoric monuments. Some authorities give Ard-no Riagh, the height of the kings). On the right, far beyond the town and river, a great shoulder of mountain drops to the plain that stretches towards Lissadell and the sea; this is Ben Bulben, where Diarmuid and Grainne were pursued Finn and where Diarmuid, Adonis-like, was wounded by the enchanted boar. The river flows through a long twisting estuary, guarded towards the mouth by a beacon, the Metal Man… the little village that lies among the sand-dunes, with the sea to the west of it. The two mountains are full of legend (1).

And he cites many important landmarks Yeats used in his poems like, the village of Dromahair, “the church among its rook-delighting trees beside the river that flows out Glences”. Then, he also points out that there is a monastery said to have been founded by St. Columba. This part of Sligo plain is also has the reference to an ancient battlefield. He further surveys the landscape as:

On the wooded sides of the lake stood the great house, Hazelwood of the Wynnes, Cleaveragh of the Wood-Martins, Markree of the Coopers, and many more up and down the country side. Lissadel of Gore-Booths was the most important in Yeats’ boyhood and manhood. In and about Sligo, there were relatives of the Yeats family; and further south, in Mayo and Galway. ‘half-legendary men’ the ancestor whom he drew into his own legend of great place(2-3).
Thus, Sligo is the space of his mind and poetry and hence, Sligo can be treated as a metaphor and is a muthaporul in thinai context. For instance, one of his last poems, “The Man and the Echo” begins to show the Sligo landscape:

In a cleft that’s christened alt
Under broken stone I halt
At the bottom of a pit
That broad noon has never lit,
And shout a secret to the stone (121)

The ‘cleft that’s christened Alt’ is near Sligo. It is also associated with magical power. Here, by ‘shouting a secret to the stone’, Yeats presents a performance of relic worship and synchronizes paganism with Christianity. Thus, the stone as a ‘part of land image’ is called uriporul in thinai, which connotes Yeats’ faith in Celtic ritual.

Another place, Lady Gregory’s “Coole” had a creative attraction for Yeats. In “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931”, he feels that the water source at Coole would be his soul:

Run underground, rise in a rocky place
In Coole demesne, and there to finish up
Spread to a lake and drop into a hole.
What’s water but the generated soul? (170)

And the poet points out:

A spot where on the founders lived and died
Seemed once more dear than life, ancestral trees (171).

“Water and trees” are not only the parts of the place but also the powerful images of Yeats’ mind. Moreover, the ‘ancestral trees’ have associations with the Celtic tree
worship, which Irish people continue to practice even today. Hence, these images may be noted for the tradition evolved from these Irish culture spaces. His “Prayer of my Daughter” opens with a stormy day at lady Gregory’s estate: “Gregory’s wood and one bare hill/whereby the haystack –ad roof- leveling wind”(125). And, this is not just an imagery the poet wants to exhibit in his poem but a picturesque presentation of poet’s disposition that has been haunted by different crisis both political and social.

The Celtic people gave a keen respect to nature and related elements. There were different cults, corresponding to the forces of nature. The water cult -- sea, rivers, streams, springs, and fountains – was undoubtedly one of the most frequently practiced by them. Lakes and marshes could also appear as magical places. Another popular cult the Celtic relished as their rite was erecting stone and they were treated as sacred objects. Cauldron, spear/sword and magic stone were considered three important talismans of the Sidhe tradition; Sidhe/Scythe was one of the gods of ancient Ireland. There are many megaliths found in Ireland. They were menhirs, dolmens and raised stones in Ireland. These stonehenges were used by the Celts for religious purposes, cemetery, places of sacrifice, astronomical observatory etc. and no doubt the site where these stones were found are treated as sacred places by the Irish (Thierry Bordas, 46-47). For instance, Yeats in “Easter 1916”, talks about changes; through his ritualistic kind of presentation he says:

Changes minute by minute,
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse plashes within it;
The long-legged moor-hens dive,
And hens to moor-cocks call;
Minute by minute they live;
The stone’s in the midst of all. (120-1)

The poem is about the political struggle demonstrated by many Irish leaders with bloodshed against England. Many leaders of ‘Rising’ were shot dead. To Yeats, they were sacrificed; by introducing stone image, here he recalls the Celtic rite of sacrifice held at the place like Stonehenge in order to rejuvenate their life. The stone also stands for the source of solidity of Irish existence. The stone symbolizes both ritualistic and political meanings embedded in the poem. Thus, the stone functions as a suggestive technique that Tholkappiyam, calls Ullurai and Iraicchi generating the meaning internal (Karupporul). K. Chellappan states that in Iracchi, the bare situation becomes the meaning whereas Ullurai consciously imparts human meaning into nature (70). And, the stone symbol is further expanded to give the intrinsic theme (Uripporul) of IRA’s political rising against British rule.

Like Sligo, Heaney’s Mossbawn, his birthplace is recurrently used in his poems. For instance, one of the poems from Heaney’s collection, North (1975), “Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication”. Presents a typical Irish farm yard:

There was a sunlit absence
The helmeted pump in the yard
Heated its iron,
Water honeyed (49).

And, the second part of the same poem gives a note on: “the tuck and frill of leaf-sprout is on the seed potatoes”(51). Potato is one of the primary crops of Irish agriculture that is a part of Irish tradition.
Also, the presence of clay, mush, clabber, muck, swamp, alluvial mud, fon and fog show the mingling of elements seem to attract Heaney. His bog poems “The Relic of Memory, “Bogland, Bogoak” and “The Tolland Man” depict the bogland as part of the Irish landscape. In “Preoccupations”, Heaney writes that the bog land has a strange assuaging effect on him. He describes it as the “memory of landscape or a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it. It is to him, an “Irish myth”, just as the frontier was to the American conscience. Bog land has been buried in the mind of the poet. So, it is a meaningful space symbol namely karupporul (meaning internal) that helps identify his Self with his native land.

The favourite place Muldoon used to record in his poems besides his birthplace is Armagh. Armagh is in County Derry. It supplies poetic energy to Muldoon. In his poem “Lull”, he greatly acknowledges the place Derry as a symbol representing pagan religious faith and political rebels of IRA. So, the place could metaphorically be read for religious and rebel space. Muldoon compares the mount of Olive with county Derry religiously as well as politically.

As your man said on the Mount of Olives,

The same is held of county Derry (41).

Mount of Olives is the border place in central Israel, east of Jerusalem and this area has been occupied by Israel since 1967. Derry, in 1921, following the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the partition of Ireland, became border city, with much of its natural economic hinterland in county Donegal cut off. And most of the IRA’s activities have been centered round the place Derry. Similarly, around Mount of Olives many events of Christian history took place. The poem ‘Lull’ has another reference to the city Armagh, the birthplace of Paul Muldoon. The incidents in Armagh during the troubles resulted in many fatalities. On 22
August 1975, the Catholic civilians, John McGleenam, Patrick Huges and Thomas Morris were killed in a non-specific Loyalists group and the gun and bomb attack on McGleenam’s Bar, upper English Street, Armagh. In 1979 there were two more incidents reported; two Protestants, an off duty member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and a civilian were shot dead by a Republican group at Ballin lane, Armagh. In the same year, two members of the British Army were killed in a Provisional Irish Republican Army land mine attack on their mobile patrol at Cathedral Road. The poem was written in 1980 and records the mood of the people who were indifferent towards the Christmas festive week:

I heard it argued in some quarters
That in Armagh they mow the hay
With only a week to go the Christmas
That no one’s in a hurry
To save it, or their own sweet selves (41).

Moreover, Armagh has legendary importance that it is called in Irish Ard Macha meaning “The Height of Macha”. It is believed that the Celtic Queen Macha (600 B.C) gave her name to the city- Ard Macha, reflecting the fact that the city developed on the hill overlooking Navan Fort(http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php title=Queen-Macha and action). Muldoon has written a poem, entitled “Macha”(New Weather, 1973), in which he recollects his historical and political memory associated with his native place Armagh:

With a sharp brooch,
Mapped your first
Hill fort
The day you fell,
At the hands of men,
You fell
Back over half a county
Clutching a town
To your breasts (8-9)

The ‘town’ refers to Ard Macha (Armagh) in county Armagh. He wrote this poem when he was in Princeton and the poem reflects the deep concern for the history, legends, religion and politics of his native place. Thus, Armagh is not merely a place in Northern Ireland but a cultural space existing in the mind of the poet. Hence, it is an identity metaphor representing his nativity. His poem “Talking Heads: True Stories” form the collection Hay (1998) reveals the fact that though the poet has settled in a foreign land, his mind is attached ever to his native land:

You can take the man out of Armagh but you may ask
Yourself,
Can you take the Armagh out of the man…( 43)

Also, there is another claim that Armagh is the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland dating back to the early fifth century when Saint Patrick established his principal church in Ireland here. So, it is considered the historical center of the Cultus of Saint Patrick.

Thus, Sligo to Yeats, Massbawn to Heaney and Armagh to Muldoon are the symbolic expressions of Irish landscape poetry, which has descended from the early Irish poetry of Book of Lore. It is a documentation of Irish names of places and landscape. This practice in Yeats, Heaney and Muldoon is natural and is genetically imbibed in their creative self. They have treated all the landscape signs of Ireland in their poems that help them identify each poet’s ‘self’ with their native land. To locate one’s self in culture space there needs
the physical space of the country as a medium. In this case, according to ‘thinai poetics’, the places and their proper names serve as identity units decoding the cultural, political and religious meaning that has been converged both in land and mind. Yeats, places like Sligo, Coole and Lady Gregory’s estate, Heaney’s Mossbawn and Bogland and Muldoon’s Armagh may be considered, in terms of Tholkappiyam, Mutharpporul. Hence, they are phenotypes that explain the relationship between the biological factors and the environmental and social conditions. Also they provide cultural material for poetry based on landscape. Thus, Thinai Poetics, one of the socio-cultural theories from the east helps study how certain poetic traditions continue to exist in the poetry of Yeats, Heaney and Muldoon and also traces the significance of landscape in identifying and promoting Irishness among their successive generations of poets.
Chapter 7

Notes and References

Books and Nonperiodicals publications:


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