

The element of beauty and use of similes in Tamil Poetics

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Tamil poets employ similes more in number than any other figures of speech to articulate the element of *beauty* in their representations. The idiosyncrasy of similes in comparison to other techniques such as employing metaphors, personification, idioms and others, is that in similes the objects that are used to compare can be part of a very large domain of the popularly understood set of objects such as *ñāyīru* (*ñāyīru anaiya nin pakaivarkku* 'for your enemies like a sun...'), *tiṅkaḷ* (*tiṅkaḷ anaiya emmanōrkkē* 'for our kins like a moon...') (Puṟam:59), *mūttār* 'elders', *neruppu* 'fire', *amiḷtam* 'nectar', *maṭamayil* 'female peacock' and so on; and they can also be part of a very selectively used uncommon ones like *piṅṭa nellin aḷḷūr anna* 'like the abundant rice in Allur' (Aham:46-14), *vēnil veḷiṟrup panai pōl* 'like a palmyra without core during the summer time' (Aham:333-11), *paḷiṅkattanna palkāy nelli* 'goosberries, like a pile of beads' (Aham:5-9) and so on. Specially, use of such uncommon objects in similes not only represents poets' eloquence in imagination and creativity, but they also found to be deferentially appealing in nature for the reason that comprehending such similes requires an in-depth knowledge of the subject matter as denoted in the poems along with a detailed knowledge of the context of their utterance from a historical perspective. One finds a rich source of such similes with uncommon objects more in Sangam than medieval poems, with an exception of a few works, like *Cittar pāṭalkaḷ*. [I shall argue in my paper how the similes with such uncommon objects weigh more in appealing the beauty of the poems than their counterparts, and how they play a significant role in studying the history of the Tamils and ancient Tamil country.]

Use of flowers and trees, for instance, as objects of comparison is very common throughout in the poems of all the genres of Tamil, but what is uncommon though is their obscure nature in the context of their comparison. One such instance is the use of *ñāḷar pū* and *ñāḷar* tree widely in Sangam as well as in medieval poems. There is a set of ten poems under the title *ñāḷar pattu* 'Ten songs of *ñāḷal*' in *aiṅṟuṇūṟu*, where each of them, composed by *ammūvanār*, employs *ñāḷar pū* and *ñāḷar* tree as an object of comparison to the hero and heroine's love affair figuratively. Particularly, the ten songs under *ñāḷar pattu* describes a scenario in a sequence of separation of the hero, love sickness of the heroine, union of hero and heroine. What is significant is that this scenario of events is depicted figuratively with the appealing features of the *ñāḷal* flower, its fragrance, the breeze and so on.

The fragrance of the *ñāḷal* flower and the breeze from it causes love-sickness with the heroine.

எக்கர் ஞாழல் செருந்தியொடு கமழத்
துவலைத் தண்துளி வீசிப்
பயலை செய்தன பனிபடு துறையே.

ekkar nāḷaṟ ceruntiyōṭu kamaḷa
tuvalait taṇṭuḷi vīcip
payalai ceytana pani paṭu tuṟaiyē (aing. 141)

'There exists
the fragrance of nāḷaṟ tree with its blossoms
a cold breeze with misty sprays
They instigate within me a sense of love-sickness'

nāḷaḷ tree that is grown in neytal nilam is described here in concurrence with heroine's desperate state of mind due to hero's separation.

The nāḷaṟ tree continues to emit its cold breeze, but the birds in the tree stay there unnoticed the comfort caused by its breeze:

This scenario is compared to hero's return:

The hero does show up finally after his long hiatus! But the heroine pretends that she didn't notice him, and she orders her eyes to be closed in order to ignore him:

எக்கர் ஞாழல் இறங்கு இணர்ப் படுசினைப்
புள்ளிறை கூரும் துறைவனை
உள்ளேன் தொழி படிஇயர்என் கண்ணே.

ekkar nāḷa liṟaṅkiṉarp paṭucinaip
puḷḷiṟai kūrn tuṟaivanai
uḷḷēn ṟoḷi paṭi iyaren kaṇṇē (aing. 142).

Further, in the same ekkar region with nāḷaṟ tree of tiny leaves and big branches that spread out like waves of ocean, the hero unites with the heroine, thus getting rid of the love sickness from her permanently. They are together now happily ever after! (pacalai nikkinan iniyē!)

எக்கர் ஞாழல் சிறியிலைப் பெருஞ்சினை
ஓதம் வாங்கும் துறைவன்
மாயோள் பசலை நீக்கினன் இனியே.

ekkar nāḷaṟ ciṟiyilaip peruñcinai
yōtam vāṅgun tuṟaivan
māyōḷ pacalai nikkina niniyē! (aing. 145).

Thus, the *ñāḷar* tree becomes the point of reference for the poet to both describe as well as compare the events that occur between the hero, heroine and the girlfriend!

The girlfriend of the heroine rejoices watching the hero and heroine being together (The heroine has pale body spots like *ñāḷar* flower)

எக்கர் **ஞாழல்** பூவின் அன்ன
சுணங்குவளர் இளமுலை மடந்தைக்கு
அணங்குவளர்த்து அகறல் வல்லா தீமோ.

ekkar *ñāḷar* pūvi nanna
cuṇaṅkuvaḷar iḷa mulai maṭantai
kaṇaṅkuvaḷart takaṇal vallā timō (aing. 146)

Now, the hero is very proud to be with heroine in the region where the beautiful *ñāḷar* tree grows abundantly with fragrant flowers:

எக்கர் **ஞாழல்** நறுமலர்ப் பெருஞ்சினைப்
புணரி திளைக்கும் துறைவன்
புணர்வின் இன்னான் அரும்புணர் வினனே.

ekkar *ñāḷa* naṇumalarp peruñcinaip
puṇar tiḷaikkun tuṇaivan
puṇarvi ninnā narum puṇar viṇanē (aing. 150)

Thus, all we know about *ñāḷar* plant is:

a) it has dense branches with fragrant flowers:

நறுமலர்ப் பெருஞ்சினை naṇumalarp peruñcinai

b) The heroine's body parts resemble *ñāḷar* flower:

பூவின் அன்ன சுணங்குவளர் இளமுலை மடந்தைக்கு
ñāḷar pūvin nanna cuṇaṅkuvaḷa iḷa mulai

c) Girls distress due to absence of *ñāḷar* flowers in the *ñāḷar* tree and wears the leaves instead.

ஞாழல் மலரின் மகளிர் ஒள்தழை அயரும்
ñāḷar malaril makaḷir oṇṭalai ayarum

d) Hero and heroine rejoice like the blooming of *ñāḷar* flower from its bud

ஞாழல் அரும்புமுதிர் அவிழிணர் நறிய கமழும்
ñāḷal arumpu mutir avilīṇar naṇiya kamaḷum tuṇaivar

e) The cool breeze from the ñālaṟ tree afflicts girls with love sickness

துவலைத் தண்துளி வீசிப்பயலை செய்தன

tuvalait taṇṭuḷi vīcip payalai ceytana

ñālaḷ tree, which may quite as well be a kind of shrub like Jasmine, and its flowers are one of many vague objects that the poets utilize to represent the element of beauty.

ñālaḷ was undeniably a popular flower as it was referred to both in Sangam and medieval poems, but its distinctiveness in the context of modern Tamil equivalent seems to be vague.

தாழை மணந்து ஞாழலொடு கெழீஇப்

tālai maṇantu ñālalotu kelīip...

'fragrance of the tālai flower along with ñālaḷ'(Akam:180)

கணம்கொள் வண்டுஆர்த்து உலாம்கன்னி நறுஞாழல்

kaṇam koḷ vaṇṭu ārttu ulām kanni naru ñālaḷ (Silampu)

'ñālaḷ flower swamped with beetles is worn by a woman...'

நிகழ்முல்லை வாயிலொடு ஞாழல் வாயில்

nikal mullai vāyilōṭu ñālaḷ vāyil (Tirunavukkaracar tēvaram: 718)

'The entrance with both Arabian Jasmin and ñālaḷ flowers'

வெறிகமழ் புன்னைபொன் ஞாழல் விம்மிய... (Tiruñanasambantar: 214)

வாழைவளர் ஞாழல்மகிழ் மன்னுபுனை துன்னுபொழில் மாடுமடலார்

(Tiruñanasampantar: 805)

There are also instances where we find references to some of the similies being very common only in Sangam but not in medieval poems. One such instance is the use of the name toṇṭi as reference to 'ones well being', 'good health' and 'prosperity', as it signifies an ancient sea-port, which could have been very cherished, wealthy and popular during the Sangam period. aingurūnūṟu that includes ten songs under 'toṇṭi pattu' makes a mention about toṇṭi to the Chera king Senkōl kuttuvan as below:

"...பல பாராட்டி வாழ்தல் ஒல்லுமோ மற்றே செங்கோற் குட்டுவன் தொண்டி யன்ன எற் கண்டு நயந்து நீ நல்காக்காலே"

'pala pārāṭṭi vāṭtal ollumō maṟṟē cenkōṟ kuṭṭuvan toṇṭiyanna... nalkākkālē' (aing. 178)
'One can not cherish like Senkottuvan's city of toṇṭi, if you don't approach me with
obedience.'

A comprehensible account of the city of toṇṭi may be found in a poem that refers to the heroine
of having possessed all of the pleasing qualities of the city of toṇṭi.

திரையிமிழ் இன்னிசை யளைஇ ய்யலது
முழவிமி ழின்னிசை மறுகு தொறிசைக்குந்
தொண்டி யன்ன பணைத்தோ
ளொண்டொடி யரிவையென் னெஞ்சு கொண்டாளே!

tirayimil innicai yaḷaii yyalatu
muḷavimi ḷinnicai maṟukutoṟi caikkun
toṇṭi yanna paṇaittō
lōṇṭoṭi yarivaiyen neṅcu koṇṭālē! (aing. 171).

The hero says: 'I am obsessed by the uniqueness of heroine, who
with a shoulder like the Palmyra tree and with thin bangles,
holds within her all the delights of the city of toṇṭi,
where one can consistently hear the noise of the ocean
along with the noise of the drums.'

Although, it may be unclear as to how one can employ the word toṇṭi in a poem as an
object of comparison, or for that matter how one can understand it unambiguously from
Sangam poems, the characteristics of this city and its popularity must have been very obvious
for the poets of the Sangam period. We find mentions of this city as object of comparison in
many Sangam works such as Aham, Aingurunuru, Kuruntokai, Patirrupattu and Purananuru.

Ahanānūru:

வளங்கெழு தொண்டி அன்ன இவள் நலனே
தென்திரைப் பரப்பின் தொண்டி முன்துறை
திண்தேர்ப் பொறையன் தொண்டி அன்ன

Aingurunūru:

துரைகெழு தொண்டி அன்ன இவள் நலனே
வண்டிமிர் பனித்துறைத் தொண்டி ஆங்கண்

Kuṟuntokai:

தொண்டி யன்னவென் நலந்தந்து
திண்டேர்ப் பொறையன் **தொண்டி** முன்றுறை

Puṟam:

வளைகடல் முழுவின் **தொண்டி**யோர் பொருந
கள்நா றும்மே, கானல்அம் **தொண்டி**

Strikingly, no reference, whatsoever, to Toṇṭi is found either in any of the post Sangam works or in any of the medieval poems. Further, use of this word both in Aham and Puṟam works invariably indicates that this city must have been known for the reasons of its wealth and prosperity rather than for any other reasons such as wars, or bravery of the heros.

Use of objects like nāḷal malar, the city of toṇṭi etc., as elements of comparison in Sangam poems - representing love and prosperity respectively - not only require an indepth knowledge of their inherent qualities, but they also require specific information about how they were understood popularly in their contexts of utterance. Without such information, understanding such similies become obscure for the reader.

Following are some of the other instances of similies that contain within them a wealth of information that may be of relevance from a historical perspective:

Sugarcane and its use in similies:

தறைமடி கரும்பின் கண்ணிடை **யன்ன**
பைத லொருகழை நீடிய சுரனிறந்து (Kuruntokai: 179)

கரும்புநடு பாத்தி **யன்ன**
பெருங்களிற் றடிவழி நிலைஇய நீரே. (Kuruntokai: 261)

கரும்புநடு பாத்தியில் கலித்த ஆம்பல்
(Aingkurunuuru: 417)

Rice:

செந்நெல் வான்பொரி சிதறி **யன்ன**
எக்கர் நண்ணிய எம்மூர் வியன்துறை (Kuruntokai)
பிண்ட நெல்லின் அள்ளூர் அன்னஎன்... (Akam)

பிண்ட நெல்லின் உறந்தை ஆங்கண்- (Akam)

Salt merchants in Sangam poems:

உமணர் வெருஉம் துறையன் னன்னே! (Puram)

கடல்நீர் உப்பின் கணஞ்சால் உமணர் (Akam)

Other instances:

ஒண்செங் கழுநீர்க் கண்போல் ஆய்இதழ் (Akam)

நீர்செறி நுங்கின் கண்சிதர்ந் தவைபோல் (Akam)