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‘Nīrayum Sīrādu’: Water, a Venerated Symbol in Select Sangam Poems

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Abstract:

*The value of water has increased owing to its scarcity in recent times. However, in comparison to the present day, the people during the Sangam period valued water for various other reasons and did not restrict it solely for basic human consumption. Water was deemed sacred and thus an independent yet integral entity. Hence, this intriguing complex relationship has instigated this paper, which attempts to highlight water, as an integral part of life as represented in the songs of *Narriṇai*. The theory used to analyse the symbols of water is Ecosemiotics. This theory deals with the relationship between people and nature and it explores the personal and social relationships to the components of nature. The image of water is explored in terms of the interconnectedness between human beings and water. Here, ecosemiotics is used as a method to interpret the meanings that Sangam people assigned to water. Moreover, Sangam poetry is replete with imagery, metaphor, signs and symbols. It also deals with how Sangam people interpreted water, which is reflected in select poetic narratives dealing with the everyday activities of Sangam people. According to them, water was a symbol of virtue, purifying element of nature, offering hope and a source of recreation. Hence, the explorations in this paper deals in detail with the relevance of water, which extends beyond its role as a bare essential requirement for human consumption.*

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Keywords: *Ecosemiotics, Sangam Literature, Water, Narrinai.*

In the recent times water is in dire demand owing to its prerequisite disposition to sustain life and its unfortunate scarcity. However, during the Sangam period people affiliated with water as a living and life-giving entity. Water gives life to earth; the earth in turn gives life to plants and animals, whereas in comparison, people these days treat water as a ‘resource’ for human consumption. Hence, this paper attempts to study water, as an integral part of life as represented in the songs of Narrinai. The purpose of writing this paper is to prove that water, an indispensable element of nature held an integral position in the society during the Sangam period as evident in the classical Sangam Literature.

Sangam means ‘an academy or fraternity’ in English. According to a seventh century commentator, there were three stages in Sangam. which lasted for 4,440, 3,700 and 1,850 years respectively. The works of the first Sangam period are said to have been lost “in the great flood of time” (Ramanujan *Poems of Love and War* xiv). Tolkappiyam, the grammar belongs to the second period and the Eight Anthologies (Ettuthokai) and Ten Long Poems (Pathu Paatu) belong to the third period. The twin epics ‘Cilappatikaram’ and ‘Manimekalai’ also belong to the Classical Tamil Literature. Narrinai is a collection of poems from Ettuthokai.

Before moving forward to the core of the paper, it is pertinent to understand that in the Indian context, classical literature and Indian sciences, acknowledge that the physical world is composed of five elements: space

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(akasha), wind (vayu), fire (agni), water (jala) and earth (prithvi). Water, as an entity served as a representation of patience and benevolence, space symbolised thought processes, wind characterised power, fire denoted boldness and land was equated to patience. The natural world was essential to the lives of the people during the Sangam period, because the different landscapes replicated the lives of the people. In addition, they also gave greater importance to water over other elements. Out of the five elements, water helps to sustain life and helps maintain the ecosystems, since it covers 71% of the earth. The flora and fauna require water to live. The water cycle maintains the level of water in the sea. For these reasons, Thiruvalluvar, a celebrated Tamil poet and philosopher, best known for Thirukkural, a collection of 1330 couplets on ethics, political and economic matters, and love, highlighted how water preserves the life of all living beings. Without it, the functions of nature will cease, which is why water brings order to human life, and without it men and women lose the structure of their purpose in life.

When water fails, functions of nature cease, you say;

Thus when rain fails, no men can walk in duty's ordered way

(Periyannan, 2017)

Ecosemiotics functions as the apt theoretical framework to analyse the coveted status of water in Sangam literature, as an entity and symbol of benevolence. Semiotics is understood as a study concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. Daniel Chandler, the British visual semiotician, at the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies, at Aberystwyth University, best-known for his publication 'Semiotics: The Basics' explains 'semiotics' as the study of signs. Apart from what people refer to as signs in everyday speech it also refers to anything which stands for something else. In a semiotic perception, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. The study of semiotics can assist to become more aware of the mediating role of signs and of the roles played by the Sangam people in constructing social relations. It assumes that reality is taken for granted as something which is wholly independent of human interpretation.

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Since, this paper is laden with ecological elements, Ecosemiotics, a branch of semiotics, describing the representation of nature as dependent illusions, serves as the theoretical support. It includes the structure of nature, as it appears, its classification, what certain elements of nature mean to people when they see and interact and eventually leading to the exploration of the personal and social relations to the components of nature. According to Winfried Noth (1996), German linguist and semiotician, “Ecosemiotics is semiotics of habitat, the aim of which is the study of the semiotic interrelations between organisms and their environment”. Ferdinand de Saussure, Swiss linguist, used a ‘dyadic’ model of semiotics where the sign consists of a signifier and signified. In contrast to Saussure’s model, Charles Sanders Peirce, American semiotician, formulated a three-part triadic model consisting of an interpretant, representamen, and an object. Subsequently, Peirce re-created the ecosemiotic model with the three dimensions: text as a sign, the object in an environment and the interpretant, which includes the contextual meaning of the landscape. Sangam people assigned multiple meanings to water, such as a symbol of purity, hope, re-creation and virtue. According to Peirce,

A representation is that character of a thing by virtue of which, for the production of a certain mental effect, it may stand in place of another thing. The thing having this character I term a representamen, the mental effect, or thought, its interpretant, the thing for which it stands, its object.

(Mats Bergman, 2018)

Sangam poetry is therefore replete with imagery, metaphor, signs and symbols, which are reflected in select poetic narratives dealing with their everyday activities.

The fivefold division (five thinai) is the system of classification based on the living environment in Sangam Literature as Kuriñci, Mullai, Marutam, Neytal and Pālai. The culture of ancient Tamils was the direct result of these physiographic divisions of the land, water and climate. The five symbolic landscapes reflect various geographical

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spaces in correlation with social and psychological characteristics. The land spaces bear the names of typical plants, and are used as elements of the meta-language of the indigenous literary theory and symbolise the basic attributes of those landscapes – reasoning a love situation and acting figures, to name a few. The following line puts across the fivefold landscape and what they symbolise in Sangam literature. Kuriñci included the hills and environs; the Mullai comprised the forests, Marutam consisted of the plains studded with wet fields, and Neytal made up the sandy coastal tract. In addition, the fifth zone Pālai is the hot climate region nourishing scrub vegetation. These physiographic divisions were harmonised with the patterns of social virtues of the people inhabiting them. To each region was ascribed a characteristic tree or flower, which was more prevalent in that region. Thus, Mullai got its name from Jasmine, Kuriñci from *Strobilanthus kunthianus*, Marutam from *Marutu-Legestromea flos-region*, Neytal from *Nymphaea Stellata* and Pālai from *Wrightia tinctoria*. In other words, the symbolic use of water in general, which when placed in stark contrast across the backdrop of distinct sign system of literary regions, is termed as ‘tinai’.

However, it is necessary to add that besides the above meanings of literary implications, the connotations of water further extends to refer to melodies or even musical instruments, which occasionally surface in the literary text. These implications and suggestions also provide evidence to the link between natural symbolism and anthropocentric factors. According to M. Varadarajan, scholar in Tamil literature describes the impact of water on man as follows, “those were days when man was more dependent upon water and therefore his habits and tastes were moulded by his environment in the world of water” (13-14). The poets of Sangam age have made this fact evident in their poems on water. The Sangam poets never lost sight of the landscape that they knew, and their poems were full of concrete and unforgettable details of the fauna and flora.

The description of a stream flooding through its course leaves the rocks with foams. These foams that drift away little by little is used in Sangam poem to describe the grieving heroine waning away in pain. Likewise, Kapilar, the poet of Kuriñci, lets his eyes wander freely over ponds, streams, falls, rivers and oceans and observes

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their beauty in them. His view was so wide that he had the faculty of detecting beauty even in humble and trifling forms found in nature. In addition, he draws attention to the importance of water in his first poem, likening it to the desperate need people have for water, to the yearning of a maiden for her lover. Kapilar also describes the love for the sweetness of honey and in doing so emphasises the importance of biodiversity. He narrates how the bees have sucked the pollen from the lotus and stores the pollen in a sandalwood tree. Again, it describes the importance of water, because water is the abode of the lotus, and even the mighty sandalwood tree requires water to live.

I can't live without him, any more
than this world could do without water.

(Murugan, 2011)

Ilantiraiyanar, the poet of Mullai, in his poem, illustrates how the confidante consoles the heroine by explaining that just like the early rains of the water cycle sometimes dodges the flowers into thinking that the rainy season has come; the heroine must also be patient as she waits for the true coming of her hero.

The poem portrays a picture of the water cycle, where the water bodies are influenced by sun's energy. The sun's heat in turn induces drought and turns the landscape into barren, moisture less element of nature, and eventually converting it to a wilderness. The fierce glow of the sun causes mirages to appear like spread out white cloths. The clouds travelling over the sea become pregnant with water as they traverse the land, but when they can bear their weight no longer, the clouds bestow rain down on the earth in due season. The foolish cassia, glorious lily and bedaly emetic nut tree think that this heralds the rainy season and put out their buds, strengthening their illusion hoping that this is when the rains come down.

As the fierce sun glowed
Causing mirages to appear like spread-out cloths.
This is no rainy season proper!
This is only the unseasonal rain

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Showered by the senseless clouds,
Dark and pregnant with water,
Which they had drunk unseasonally from the roaring sea.
They have poured
Unable to bear the load of water!

(Murugan, 2011)

It gives a clear picture of the water cycle and the deceitfulness of the early rains. Thiruvalluvar acknowledges the significance of water and the water cycle in the lines, “If it be said that the duties of life cannot be discharged by any person without water, so without rain there cannot be the flowing of water”. (Periyannan, 2017)

Moving further to elucidate the relationship Sangam people shared with water bodies, Kotalurp Palkannanar, the poet of Marutam, in his poem describes the streams, ponds and fields of the village where the lily plants grow. He uses the streams as a metaphor for the streets. They live in the midst of nature where,

You proclaim the advent of the village festival
In the streets, wide and long.
I beseech you, O potter, to include this too,
As your message

(Murugan, 2011)

The poem narrates the richness of the flowers because of the life giving streams and likewise, the villagers are good people. Water constellation, including ponds, streams, falls, rivers and oceans are used effectively that even the tiny velvet bug of the rainy season is a part of the canvas. The poem also highlights the need to respect the intrinsic value of all life forms.

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Kannamullanar, the poet of Neythal tract depicts the beauty of the ocean with the flocks of herons and cranes flying over the sea in his poem, and when they fly, they resemble a silver conch. The waves bring blossoms as they break. The sea is huge and expansive-it covers 71% of the earth. The poem also posits about the home away from the sea, but still 'at this home', they get the succulent fish from the sea benefitting from this amazing deep.

We spend the daytime in your company
Counting the flocks of cranes
That presents a picture of silver conchs
Wreathed in the form of garland,
Perched on the sandbanks that looks as if
It's the light of the moon heaped up
On the shore of the sea, huge, expansive

(Murugan, 2011)

From this poem, it is evident from an ecological point of view that the sea is a home for sea birds such as cranes and herons, as well as for the shellfish, such as the conch and other countless fishes. As much as the description is aesthetic, in terms of portrayal of its beauty and the serene ambience, it also explains the delicious bounty, in the form of sea animals, available for consumption.

Tanimakanar, the poet of Pālai, his poem, shows that the people during the Sangam period had in depth understanding of astronomy and meteorology. By observing the lightning and the dark rain clouds, people knew that if the clouds moved towards the west it would be a harbinger of heavy rains, thus indicating that people during this period predicted the changes in nature with accuracy. They also knew that the rain would travel south after the initial downpour. As expected of these rains, they made the land highly fertile.

It's even like the monsoon clouds

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That drink up water from the eastern sea

And darkening, travel towards the west

Flashing strokes of lightning bright

(Murugan, 2011)

An Eco-semiotic understanding of select Sangam poems with reference to water is represented in the following manner. In the *Kurinci* landscape 'love' is a representamen and water signifies altruism and benevolence to humankind. In *Mullai Tinai*, 'duty' is the representamen and it highlights the understanding of the cyclical pattern for life. In the Marutham landscape, the representation of water strongly suggests the reverential acknowledgment of the intrinsic value of all life forms. In the Neytal landscape water signifies 'hope' and offers a promise for the hopeless and the needy. The Palai landscape highlights the 'lack' of water in an arid land and the value of water in times of need.

Sangam people understood that with two thirds of the earth's surface covered by water and the human body consisting of 75 percent of it; therefore, it is clear that water is one of the prime elements responsible for life on earth. This paper posits that the Sangam People thrived in a society which was advanced in their ecological understanding whereby people developed their society by making water an integral part of life. All the water bodies, whether big or small, were a symbol of good omen in the everyday life of the Sangam people. Thus, water served as a muse for the Sangam poets, providing further evidence that the Sangam people knew the importance of conserving water by venerating it. The sensitivity towards water, did not arise solely from the need for human consumption, i.e. as a 'resource' but because they treated water as an integral entity of their lives.

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