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Tradition and Change in Post-Independence Tamil Literature

INTRODUCTION

During the more than two thousand years of written Tamil literature many political changes occurred, of which the one hundred and fifty years of effective dominance over South India by the British and the two hundred and fifty years of contact with them is only a short episode, which cannot be expected to have produced revolutionary changes in the literature. The major Western influence on it was the introduction of prose fiction. Tamil writers, however, have made therein a culture-specific choice in accordance with their special gift for concision. While the novel reigns supreme in Western prose fiction, Tamil writers prefer the short story. Unlike Viṣṇu's *avatāra* Vāmana, it does not need to extend its dwarf-form to measure the whole world, in Chidambara-subramanyam's words (1995: 5). Besides, they fill the alien form with an Indian content. Ramamirtham¹ (1993: 162) has claimed that he uses imported tools to make an Indian sacred marriage badge. These tendencies continue to apply to the period under discussion.

Based on a small selection of works from a corpus of more than a thousand short stories² and a dozen novels, this essay points out the characteristic features of Tamil prose literature³ of the last fifty years. Given the co-existence of the old and the new, it will be divided into three parts discussing: 1) works in which tradition is unquestioningly approved; 2) works that stress modern developments, and 3) works in which tradition and change are intimately mixed. In conclusion, I shall give a personal appraisal of the greatest Tamil writer of the post-independence period.

¹ For a monograph on this writer see Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1995).

² About half of these works have been consulted by Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1983).

³ Since I am more interested in the cultural content of Tamil literature than in its form, I shall not deal with the evolution of Tamil poetry.

1. TRADITION

Spiritual Culture

Since the late *Caṅkam* period, about the end of the first millennium of the Christian era, religion or religious philosophy has been conspicuous in Tamil literature. Despite all modernisation and westernization, it has lost nothing of its appeal to the Tamils. Tamil writers do not hesitate to tackle in a few colourful pages concepts, which have been treated over and over again in learned commentaries. In 'The three actions' Kalpana (1971*b*: 167-81) elaborates the *advaita* conviction that the individual soul (*ātma*) has to come to realise that it is ultimately identical with the cosmic soul (*paramātmā*). When told this doctrine by his *guru*, the disciple objects that, in this case, he would also have to perform the three divine actions. The *guru* agrees and reminds him that, in his former life, he indeed did so. He married a beautiful stranger and begot two children with her, thus having been Brahmā, the creator. Saving their lives in difficult situations, he was Viṣṇu, the preserver. Then, after discovering that his wife continued to see her former lover and squander his wealth on him, he killed her and his children in a fit of rage, thus becoming Śiva, the destroyer. The *guru* informs his disciple that he will continue to perform the threefold action in his future lives as well.

Parthasarathi's 'The beauty of god' (1978: 187-91) expounds the Śaiva Siddhānta view that god is manifest in the world. A *devadāsī* – temple dancer-cum-prostitute – noticing a renouncer ecstatically looking at her prides herself mentally that her beauty will be able to make him break his vow of chastity. However, she has to hear that he is not attracted by her body but because in her he sees the beauty of god's creation.

There is a strong strand of mysticism in Indian culture. Ramamirtham, a writer with a mystic bent, has tried to communicate his mystic experiences in many of his works. In one of these (1986: 4-7) he sees the goddess descend in the sacred lamp (*kuttuvilakku*) and put the red flower with which the lamp is decorated into her hair. He is thrilled, even though he only catches a glimpse of her back and face slightly turned sideways. Mystic visions, he knows, cannot be clear.

Devotion and pilgrimage are two cardinal, partly overlapping aspects of Hinduism. While ancient sacred texts stress the need for mental and ritual purity, oral and written devotional literatures often disregard the latter. Jeyakanthan (1978: 51-75) in his 'A devotee, poor thing' adopts this view.

An old beggar woman is in the habit of offering the miserable food she cooks for herself first to Kṛṣṇa in his temple. When the temple priest discovers her unorthodox doings, he is appalled and locks the temple door at night. A few days later he finds that the bangles have slipped from Kṛṣṇa's arms, the

god has become lean. Here Jeyakanthan applies a stereotypical image of women longing for their husbands or lovers in ancient Tamil poetry to a religious subject. Even though the priest can hardly believe his eyes he feels obliged henceforth to leave the temple door open. The old woman starts happily cooking again and the god recovers.

Krishnamurty's 'The money of god' (1970: 193-96) deals with the fact that devotion may not disregard only ritual purity but morality as well.

On a pilgrimage to Tirupati the protagonist unwarily tells a fellow passenger that he is carrying a large sum of money, which he has vowed to offer to the god Venkateśvara. The fellow passenger steals it. By chance, the penniless pilgrim catches sight of the thief again and overhears him say that he has made a good catch but is thinking of offering the money himself to the god before setting out on other enterprises. The pilgrim is happy that his vow will be vicariously fulfilled. He himself will make the pilgrimage on a later date.

Belief in the power of curse, widespread in real life, appears in several Tamil literary works. In Janakiraman's 'A mendicant came' (1995a: 105-17) a clever but unscrupulous lawyer inspecting the dining hall at his son's wedding notices a shabby beggar among the important invited guests. He rudely chases him away, even though the beggar implores him to let him appease his hunger. Before leaving, however, his eyes rolling like those of a terrifying god, the beggar shouts that he will come back when his host has tears in his eyes. At the end of the wedding ceremony the groom suddenly dies. For the feast given after the mourning period the beggar presents himself again. Questioned about his supernatural powers, he claims not to know the future and denies that his words caused death. He tries to explain the events by reference to all-pervading sound (somewhat like the much debated concept of non-locality in modern physics that recalls Indian philosophical ideas).

2. SOCIAL LIFE

The Family

Unlike in the West, nothing indicates that the joint family might be disappearing in India, even though urbanisation has made it more difficult and reduced its incidence. Ramamirtham (1972b: 93-115) chooses the mythical milk sea from which nectar and poison were churned out as an apt metaphor for the joys and sorrows of life in a joint family. A young wife in a letter to her husband away on work describes the happenings in her new family. A frail old ancestor living on the top floor of the house is treated almost like a family goddess. A sister-in-law, who tragically lost her husband, continues to live in the family and is assisted during her periods of depression. Ramamirtham thus

sees the joint family as a very positive institution, which rewards self-abnegation by offering a home for the aged and a haven for the bereaved.

Vannanilvan (1976: 11-34) presents a grim version of the family spirit. During a severe drought the aunt Esther, who runs the big Christian joint family, decides that they have to migrate to a more fertile area. She knows, however, that an old sick grandmother cannot be transported. In the interest of all the younger members of the family, therefore, she takes upon herself a terrible task. The grandmother suddenly dies, implicitly because she suffocated her, thus removing the obstacle to the family's departure.

Marina treats the theme of the joint family in a comic tone. The 'Separate household' (1974) desired by the son after his marriage and much opposed by his traditional wife does not last long. At the first signs of her morning sickness, which require help from her mother-in-law, he gladly agrees to resume their joint living.

The tradition of arranged marriage goes without saying in most Tamil works. Besides arrangement according to the endogamous caste principle, Dravidian India has other marriage rules, for which caste is no issue. A man's ideal spouse is mostly his real or classificatory cross-cousin, some castes preferring the maternal cross-cousin, others the paternal one and still others allowing both.

Subbiah's 'The dishonest one' (1970: 220-33) honours the cross-cousin rule in a unique way. His nickname is ironic since it refers to a man of exceptional probity and impartiality. Not wanting to offend either his maternal uncle or his paternal aunt anxious to give their daughters in marriage to him, he decided to marry both girls. Alas, he who is called to settle all disputes in the village, in his own house has to live with continuous quarrels because his two wives do not get along with each other.

The caste hierarchy may not be clear in all cases, but there is not dispute about the hierarchy between husband and wife. So far feminism has had little impact on Indian women and certainly not on Lakshmi Subramaniam.

In her story 'Pride' (1975: 32-38) the daughter complains to her mother that her husband never shows any appreciation for her professional achievements. The mother, however, understands the reason for her son-in-law's behaviour, because the wife must always stand one step below her husband, she asserts. Only after the working woman presents her husband with a fine baby son does he tell her that he is proud of her, thus making her happy.

Throughout history, as faithfully reflected in Tamil literature, there has been a double sexual standard. Absolute faithfulness has been enjoined on the wife, while the husband's escapades have been treated lightly. Ancient Tamil literature allowed an adulterer's wife only a little sulking, separation from him was unthinkable. Nor does the wife in Jeyakanthan's 'Check-mate' (1975b: 75-88) ask for a divorce from her wayward husband, but she lives in her own

world performing only the duties he specifically requests and nothing more. While waiting for the latest girl who has caught his fancy, the husband asks her to play chess with him. She loses all her important pieces but puts him check-mate. When the girl finally arrives, he tells his wife to send her away and then sits down for another game. The title of the story is, of course, symbolic, alluding to the belief that the wife may acquire the power to reform her husband by her very submissiveness, a form of austerity (*tapas*).

In the higher castes a wife's duty to her husband extends beyond his death, leading to the prohibition of remarriage. Protest against this prohibition in Tamil literature started in the British period and has continued to be voiced by more recent writers (cf. part B). But a high-caste widow has had also other impositions. Kalki's 'Kētāri's mother' (1974: 28-40) deals with the shaving of a widow's head that now has become rare.

Kētāri's mother willingly subjected herself to having her head shaved when news reached her of her husband's death, even though he had abandoned her. Kētāri cannot bear to see his beloved mother thus made ugly and plans to start a movement to stop the practice but has no time to do so. On his premature death his own young wife, the daughter of a very orthodox man, has her head shaved.

In this story the two women bow to tradition, but the male character (and with him the writer) obviously disapproves of it. The story thus forms a bridge to the part on change characterised amongst other things by protest.

Caste

In no work of modern Tamil literature known to me does the writer uphold discrimination against low castes, but several writers recognise that caste has also positive functions. It may, for instance, be considered an extended family. If a village has no public place of accommodation, a traveller will naturally ask a caste fellow to put him up for the night. In one of Ramamirtham's novels (1989) such an accidental acquaintance leads to the marriage between the stranger and his host's daughter.

Just as love for one's native country need not imply hatred or contempt of others, so respect for one's caste need not imply discrimination towards others. In 'Self-knowledge' Jeyakanthan (1975a: 17-40) presents a Brahmin who takes off his sacred thread and renounces his caste not because he wants the caste system abolished but because he feels unworthy of his caste. He is a not very learned family priest who comes to this decision after being publicly shamed for his defective knowledge. This remarkable story comes from a leftist writer, but a Hindu's respect for his caste is not of his invention. Real-

life Gujarati Untouchables hold their caste to be sacred (Randeria 1998: 96) even though they would, of course, like it to be ranked higher.

3. CHANGE

Social Life

Marriage, Sex and Family

Protest against traditional marriage practices started during the British period but has increased in vigour since independence.

Unlike Western writers of the past who, in the case of contrast between parents and children, regularly sided with the young, Tamil writers see both sides of the coin. However, if the young are courageous enough to contract a love marriage, which in fiction, if not necessarily in reality, is mostly an inter-caste marriage, they expect the parents to forgive. Kalpana (1974: 44-49) in 'The back door' clearly approves of her heroine, who refuses the gifts her family members secretly bring her. They have forgiven her in their hearts for her (implicitly) intercaste marriage but dare not admit it openly to one another and society at large. She will accept their gifts only when they come openly through the front door.

While in the modern West the payment of dowry has almost disappeared, in modern India the amount of dowry has gone up steeply. Parents, who made financial sacrifices for their sons' western-type education, enabling them to obtain good white-collar jobs, expect their daughters-in-law to pay for the benefit of marrying well-to-do men. In agreement with the law-giver Tamil writers are unanimous in condemning the evil of dowry.

During the wedding ceremony, in Sarawasti's 'The younger brother⁴ of the god of death' (1974: 18-22), the groom demands a scooter in addition to the dowry already paid because he has found out that his future in-law is richer than he had thought. The bride's father tells her that he could easily add the scooter but does not like the groom's excessive money-mindedness. She agrees to break off the wedding and marry the penniless but worthy young man her father proposes next.

In ancient Tamil poetry the wife never thinks of spontaneously committing adultery or of paying her adulterous husband with the same coin. Some revolutionary writers such as Putumaippittan began to touch this hot iron in

⁴ Some Tamil idiomatic expressions I have called 'open' since they leave a choice of wording. Similarity may be metaphorically expressed through neighbourhoodly relations or fictive kinship. 'Younger brother of the god of death', thus, means 'almost as cruel as the god of death'.

the British period. It has been taken up repeatedly in more recent times. While in real life and in fiction the (low caste) husband's reaction may be violent, some fictional higher caste husbands refrain from taking revenge. This is the case of the husband in Janakiraman's novel 'Mother' (1976), who does not chase his wife away even though he knows that only his first son is his own. In Alagiriswamy's 'Two brothers' (1987a: 5-25) the husband's reaction to adultery is also mild yet tragic at the same time.

The younger brother, Cuppu, steadfastly refuses to marry because he knows that his salary is needed by his elder brother, who brought him up but now lives in poverty with his wife and children. One day, finding himself alone with his sister-in-law, Cuppu approaches her. She neither shouts nor encourages him. When her husband suddenly arrives, Cuppu prostrates himself before him asking forgiveness. The doubly betrayed one blames himself for having permitted his brother's self-sacrifice for so long but then sends him away for ever.

Even though never indulging in clinical descriptions, as now fashionable in the West, this story and several others play more strongly on the sexual theme than most writers dared in earlier decades.

In modern times paternal authority may be contested not only and not exclusively in marriage matters. Sujata's 'The son talking to his father' (1974: 62-70) deals with incommunicability between father and son.

The father has done his best to make his son pass his exams and get a job, humiliating himself and bribing people to achieve these ends. He hopes that his son will marry the daughter of the important person who helped by finding a job for him. The son, however, resigns from the job, which does not agree with him, and refuses to get married. He shows no gratitude for his father's efforts to make him a respectable middle-class citizen. Being unconcerned about the future, he would not mind doing menial work for some time just to be free for anything that comes to his mind, like writing poetry, teaching deaf-mute children or roaming around in Varanasi. The father cannot believe that these are his son's last words and sets out to find a new job for him.

Another form of the generation gap has also become a serious problem in India. With crowded city dwellings and both husband and wife working outside the house there may be no room for the aged and no one to care for them. In a tragic story by Ramamirtham (1991: 24-34) the old parents expect that their sons will soon ask for the partition of property, which will mean that they will have to live alternatively with one or other of their children. The husband's suspicion that their children might separate them, one son taking care of his mother and the other of his father comes as such a shock to his wife that she dies of heart attack.

The old mother in Janakiraman's 'The unwanted pumpkin' (1995c: 80-95) – a metaphor for an unwanted person – has even prayed god to make her

die in order no longer to be a burden on her children. She dies peacefully, returning from her daughter's house to her own village for the Śivarātrī festival.

The plight of the aged has increased in recent times, but that of the high caste widow and the Untouchable is of long standing. Jeyakanthan, who has defended the widow's right to marry again several times (1974a: 9-27; 1975e: 9-35), in one case (1975f: 120-41) brings together the two most underprivileged members of Indian society. A poor Brahmin widow dying of tuberculosis leaves her little daughter in the care of an Untouchable ex-soldier, whom she has met on the train.

The Wider Society

Although never as prominent as religious and family themes in Tamil literature, caste problems are dealt with from various perspectives. Kamala Vriddhachalam (1971: 71-80) shows how difficult it is to rid oneself of the concept of caste pollution. A Brahmin woman treats her Mutaliyār neighbour like a dear relative. She has no objection to her little daughter eating some cooked food in the Mutaliyār's house. However, when another neighbour reproaches her for this unorthodox behaviour, she tries to hide the fact with a lie, as the Mutaliyār painfully notices.

Ponnusamy's 'Dearer than life' (1984: 130-44) is an Untouchable's attempt to raise his self-esteem.

In addition to working as an agricultural labourer, he is skilful in thatching roofs. However, since he suffers from fainting attacks, the doctor has categorically forbidden him ever to climb a roof again. His wife sends away the higher caste man who wants his roof thatched, but he decides to do so unbeknown to her. Ordering a higher caste man to give him the things he needs while he is on the roof compensates him for the humiliation of having to sit on the ground in a tea shop, while higher caste men sit on a bench.

Social protest has been occasionally voiced by higher caste writers throughout the period under discussion and even earlier, but in recent decades writers of untouchable castes, now increasingly called dalits, have begun to deal with the exploitation and oppression of the lowest members of Indian society. In their *engagé* literature the ideological message tends to override aesthetic considerations (Kannan and Gros 1996: 147-50). However, some dalit writers with a broader view admit that oppressors do not invariably belong to higher castes. Thus the Christian washermen in Imaiyan's novel 'Mules' (1994) are at the mercy of their unscrupulous Paraiyan employers. Ponnusamy's above story also implicitly acknowledge the fact that, while the opposition between Brahmins and Untouchables writ large in the Indological literature and also in political propaganda has become almost irrelevant,

discrimination against Untouchables continues to be practised by non-Brahmin castes of intermediate rank.

Ancient Tamil literature mentions the poverty of bards without any attempt to reform society. In modern literary works, conversely, the description of poverty is implicit or explicit social protest. Rajanarayanan's story entitled 'Curry leaves' (1975a: 137-51) is a metaphor for the miserable condition of agricultural labourers. Curry leaves are cooked with the food for their flavour and then discarded. Similarly, agricultural labourers lacking social security are discarded, i.e. reduced to begging when they no longer have the strength to work.

While Rajanarayanan realistically shows that the coolie couple's life in his story⁵ is not only suffering but also has some moments or periods of joy, minor writers produce entirely black stories rife with rape, murder and madness. Such unrelieved negativity or pessimism is not found in earlier writings.

Modern Tamil literature also treats the cruelty of police. Dilip Kumar (1985: 108-19) gives a particularly horrifying description of a prisoner's torture and murder. Ashokamitran couches his protest against police measures in a more complex story (1996: 152-60).

A childless policeman treats a little boy as if he were his son. When a silver plate is stolen in the boy's family and discovered in the servant's house, the boy's father begs the policeman to let the servant go, knowing what would happen to him if he were arrested. The policeman claims that the case is not under his jurisdiction. After having been shown the ex-servant, who had been almost beaten to death by police, the boy no longer wants to have anything to do with his former friend.

Tamil literary works specifically dealing with the political situation are rare. Rajanarayanan's novel 'The Andaman Nāyakkar' (1984), however, covers almost the whole period under discussion. A youth of Nāyakkar caste playfully raised the Indian flag towards the end of the British period and stubbornly refused to take it down when ordered to do so by the village headman. Angry at this act of insubordination by a member of a family in his service, the headman denounces the youth to the British and contrives to have him deported to the Andaman islands with a life sentence. Outraged at this injustice the youth attacks a British officer. He is, therefore, considered a dangerous subject and does not benefit from the amnesty given to other prisoners at independence. After fifty years in jail he returns to his village. In the meantime all his relatives have died or left, but some villagers help and encourage him. He takes part in a peaceful political demonstration, is hit on the head by a police *lathi* charge and dies.

⁵ For a monograph on this writer see Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1996).

Western-style psychological investigation in Tamil literature started in the British period but has become deeper in more recent years. Jeyakanthan, for instance, convincingly and amusingly describes the states of mind of an adolescent who, caught by religious fervour sets out for the Himalayas. Hunger and fear of darkness, however, prevent him from getting beyond the next market town (1975g: 73-104). Alagiriswamy's 'The good woman' (1987b: 54-67) is a landlady who normally treats her tenants kindly but, when financial straits oblige her to ask for loans from them, she becomes rude and unjust. This is her way of hiding her embarrassment and trying to preserve her self-esteem. Ramamirtham's 'The bath of fire' (1962: 99-120) is the extraordinary story of a wife's mental battle with herself. She envies her husband's kindness and capacity to befriend all. At times her envy grows into hatred. She should like to scratch the peaceful face of her sleeping husband. Only a terrible accident caused by his very helpfulness, when fire-crackers explode in his face, makes her finally win the battle with herself. Seeing his continuous suffering she is carried away by a wave of feeling and tightly embraces him.

Language

The major innovation in Tamil literature during the last fifty years has occurred in language. As Tamil is the most diglossic language of India, colloquial speech differs markedly from the literary style, not only in vocabulary and pronunciation but also in grammar. Putumaippittan, a great Tamil writer of the first part of the century, made sparing use of colloquialism, but from the early sixties⁶ Tamil authors began generally to employ the spoken language in the direct speech of their characters, while continuing to write the narrator's commentaries in the literary style. In Ramamirtham's 'Clay' (1972a: 126-35) a villager tells the events to the author. The story is, therefore, almost completely written in the spoken language. Jeyakanthan sometimes announces his colloquial intention in the very titles of his stories such as 'What do you say, Sir' (1975c: 49-57) and 'Do love, Sir' (1974b: 64-76). Sundara Ramaswamy's comic 'Love' (1977: 39-55) gives us a taste of the regional dialect of the Tirunelveli district. Marina writes all his comedies in the spoken language, mostly the Brahmin dialect. Rajanarayanan preserves the oral flavour of folk tales gathered by himself and others by using the narrators' own speech forms (for instance Rajanarayanan and Selvaraj 1993). Imaiyan's novel about the plight of Christian washermen for Untouchables is mostly told by a hard-working mother and, therefore, predominantly written in the Untouchables'

⁶ This date refers to publications in book form. In most cases the works were first published in magazines. The triumphant progress of the spoken language in modern Tamil literature, therefore, has already begun in the fifties.

dialect. (Linguists, one must know, divide the Tamil spoken language into Brahmin, non-Brahmin and Untouchable speech forms).

Some colloquialisms have begun to enter even the narrative parts of modern Tamil literature, but this does not mean that the spoken language may oust the literary one in the foreseeable future. The Tamils' love and respect for their literary language with its long history is too great for this to happen (cf. Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1990c: 171-89). Simultaneously, it is unlikely that spoken Tamil will be completely uniformized as some linguistic reformers would like it to be. Writers, in any case, have understood the literary asset of having regional and caste dialects, as well as the copious vocabulary of the literary style, at their disposal. The written Tamil language has, thus, been further enriched, delighting the literary connoisseur, but, alas, not the foreigner learning the language.

4. TRADITION AND CHANGE

Strictly speaking, there has been a blend of tradition and change in all instances cited. Marina, for example, couches the defence of the traditional joint family in the spoken language and Janakiraman's novel centring on adultery is mostly set in a Vedic school. Therefore, only a distinction by degree separates the works discussed in this part from preceding ones.

Spiritual Culture

A common fusion of tradition and change consists in creating new versions of ancient myths. In Akilan's 'Indra's liberation' (1976: 79-87) Sītā defends Indra and Ahalyā. Gautama, she claims, won Ahalyā in a false contest by walking around a cow rather than circling the world as Indra did. Beautiful Ahalyā was meant for the god and not for Gautama, with whom she could have hardly been happy. Indra, therefore, wanted to punish Gautama for his cheating. Accepting her arguments, Rāma talks to Gautama, who removes his curse from Indra and Ahalyā. However, Sītā cannot enjoy the fruit of her pleading because, in the meantime, she has been banished by Rāma for no fault of her own.

Philosophical reflections were also prominent in Tamil prose works of the first part of the century and have lost nothing of their attraction in the last fifty years. Jeyakanthan's 'What is non-existent?' (1974c: 162-74) presents a curious fusion of age-old religious ideas with modern, generally non-religious scientific ones.

A scientist who discovered the splitting of the atom and never bothered about god is approached by him or, more exactly 'it', the cosmic soul, which wants to take one of his senses away from him, but, apparently considering the scientist's persistent striving like an ancient *ṛṣi*'s austerities, it gives him the boon of choosing which one. The scientist replies that *paramātmā* may take away what it likes but in compensation must give him a non-existent sense. Finding itself unable to do so – *illātatu* is a pun meaning both 'that which is non-existent' and 'that which cannot exist' – *paramātmā* furiously announces his death to the scientist. The latter remains unperturbed, knowing that he is only a link in the chain of mankind and that his scientific descendants will discover more and more new things so that nothing may be impossible for them.

The story thus paradoxically fuses the Western idea of progress based on a linear conception of time with the Indian idea of cyclical time in which no creation *ex-novo* is possible.

The rite of fire-walking appears in several modern tales. In Subbiah's 'The flower (fire)-pit' (1970: 234-47) a soldier returning after many years of absence finds that his betrothed cousin has vowed to take part in a fire-walking ceremony. Despite his objection, she does so and remains unharmed. He claims that walking over fire is no more difficult than walking over ice and snow as he had done in the Himalayas. He descends into the fire-pit and is badly burnt. She assures him that he will recover because she has taken another vow: if he survives she will again walk over burning embers carrying her child on her hip.

Her vow is patently inspired by Sāvitrī's trick to obtain her husband's life from the god of death.

Janakiraman's comic 'Buffalo *poṅkal*' (1990: 1-11) upholds the continued celebration of the *poṅkal* festival but wants to extend it.

A she-buffalo tells her male ploughing companion that her last master was a city Brahmin. Although claiming to be a non-dualist, he made the dualistic distinction between cows and buffaloes. The former he celebrated at *poṅkal* and gave them much food but not the latter. To fill her belly and revenge herself, she ate her mistress's Benares silk saree as well as cotton sarees hanging on the wall. As a consequence she was severely beaten and sold to a farmer who now makes her pull the plough. Her revolutionary spirit has not, however, left her. She will continue to fight for her right to a buffalo *poṅkal*.

The symbolic reference to dark-skinned low castes who want to be given the same prestigious rank in society as light-skinned high castes rather than abolishing the caste system can hardly be overlooked.

Social Life

Breaches of the traditional marriage rules may, but need not, be approved of by the Tamil writers, who know that the parents' arrangement can be in the interest of the young in addition to that of the whole family.

Rajanarayanan's 'A love story' (1975*b*: 16-41) presents first a breach of these rules owing to modernization and westernization and then a rueful return to them.

The narrator envies his friend, who romantically courted a Christian girl and then married her against his parents' wish. Conversely, his own childhood marriage to his cousin, he laments, had nothing of the romantic. — After a brief period of happiness, however, fissures begin to appear in the intercaste and interreligious marriage. The Christian woman is not the ideal submissive wife her husband expected. Besides, differences between the ill-matched couple's food habits render their lives unpleasant. The marriage ends in divorce. Grown wise by this experience, the narrator's friend asks his parents to arrange another marriage for him to a Hindu girl.

Janakiraman's 'The long journey' (1995*b*: 197-209) deals once more with adultery, but this time the author blends rejection of tradition and abidance by or return to it somewhat like the preceding case.

Bāli, married to a man fifteen years her senior, has her husband's younger friend as a lover. Every now and then he travels more than three hundred miles to see her under some pretext. At his latest visit she tells him that her husband had fallen seriously ill. To assure his recovery and in thanksgiving for it she is now engaged in a forty-eight-day vow. When he touches her chin she washes it to remain pure in accordance with her vow. Regretfully, she sends him away not just for now but for ever.

Bāli's behaviour shows that she values her social status as an auspicious married woman, so important in traditional India, more than sexual gratification.

According to the ancient Indian law-givers, a twice-born man in the third stage of his life should become a forest-dweller, separating himself from the affairs of the world. This stage is now reinterpreted as that of the pensioner. Knowing that the aged may become a burden to their families, a fictional character has half-seriously claimed that this is the reason why ancient sages invented the *vānaprastha stage* (Janakiraman 1996: 39-59). However, a desire to gradually retire from involvement in this world and turn to religion may also arise in those who have no financial or family problems. Parthasarathi puts this case in a modern political context.

While waiting for the election results to come in, a stateminister of Tamilnadu passes the night in introspection. He admits to himself that power has corrupted him and that he cannot bear the thought of defeat. He also re-

members, however, that the *Bhagavad Gītā* enjoins on a man to do his duty unconcerned about the fruits of his actions. By the end of the night he has reached the decision to resign, which the news of his victory cannot change any more. He will be content to be grandfather to his daughter's little girl (1972: 5-36).

The dictum of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the concept of *karma yoga* are about duty or work in the widest sense of the term. Work as incessant activity and productivity opposed to contemplation is not part of the Indian tradition. Jeyakanthan repeatedly preaches it, for instance in the story entitled 'Words of mouth' (1975d: 75-91).

A young woman born blind lives by making baskets. She meets a young man blinded by small-pox and teaches him to work rather than beg. (He knows how to make reedpipes). The two fall in love and reveal their feelings in endless 'words of mouth'.

With this expression the author explicitly ties his story upholding the modern work ethic to ancient Tamil literature, since his characters invert a famous couplet of the *Tirukkuraḷ*, which states that lovers looking into each others' eyes need no 'words of mouth'.

In Kalki's novel 'The princess of the Cōlai hills' (1976) tradition is represented by Tamil oral epics about events at the time when the British established their sway over Tamilnadu. Modernity consists in parallel events during the fight for independence.

A modern freedom fighter comes to know through dreams and daydreams that he is the *avatāra* of a man who paid with his life for fighting the British one hundred years ago and whose lover committed suicide. The girl who loves the modern freedom fighter does not die, but her mind become deranged when she realises that she has involuntarily caused his imprisonment and possible death sentence. He is not killed because India has been granted independence in the meantime, but he becomes a world renouncer on hearing the fate of his beloved.

Language

Just as modern developments in post-independence Tamil literature have a linguistic component, so has the fusion of tradition and change. Similes and metaphors are a striking example of it. Probably because of the long dominance of poetry in Tamil literature, modern prose writers have preserved a love for poetic comparison. Not only the frequent use of figurative language but also the subjects and objects of comparison testify to the fusion of the old and the new. Mythology, ritual and the family are among staples of similes and metaphors that often creatively transform age-old images.

In the following I shall give only a few instance of this fascinating subject, which I have repeatedly treated on other occasions (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1990a: 109-16; 1990b: 117-35; 1992: 95-106; 1994: 109-32; etc.).

For instance, Hindu mythology is referred to by Rajam Krishnan, who speaks of an earthquake that makes pots and pans tumble 'as if they were beating the rhythm to Kālī's dance' (1978: 60). Kalpana compares the clear morning sky to Murukan's Himalayan reed pond *śaravaṇa* (1971: 117). Her simile is expressive without making any change in the mythic image. Ramamirtham, conversely, intentionally reinterprets the meaning of Apitā, the heroine's name in one of his novels. While Pārvatī's epithet *apitā* refers to the fact that her breasts are unsucked because her children did not drink her milk, Ramamirtham gives it the meaning of untouched (or immaculate) and impossible to be touched (1970: i).

Both temple and domestic rituals provide an almost inexhaustible source of suggestive comparisons. Maharishi states that at a certain age it takes enormous efforts to pull the wheel of life 'like the wheels of a temple car that have got stuck in the mud' (1976: 96). Pots filled with water are indispensable auspicious items in many rituals. Jeyakanthan thus compares his Brahmin character, who manages to preserve his personal purity in the midst of impurity, to a pot filled to the brim, in which the water does not shake (1973: 12). Choosing as the relevant criterion for his simile not the social meaning of the sacred thread but its emotional and auspicious one, Alagiriswamy writes of a legendary couple singing accompanied by the guitar: 'The three sounds blended harmoniously like the fibres of the sacred thread' (1978: 153-54).

In the last simile the married couple was the subject of comparison, but family scenes may also become its object. When looking at the changing colours of clouds at sunset, the preparation of the wedding ceremony comes to the protagonist's mind in one of Ramamirtham's stories (1981: 83). He imagines that the bride finds no saree to her liking. The embroidered multi-coloured sarees she tries on and then discards pile up in shining heaps.

The sad condition of the high-caste widow provides the theme of both stories and similes within stories. In Sundara Ramaswamy's words, after a century-old tamarind tree has been felled, the cross-road where it stood looks like a widow (1973: 240), i.e. unadorned and made ugly.

Some literary works mentioned dealt with the problem of the aged as a consequence of modern living. Ramamirtham (1984: 43) approaches a timeless unsolvable one. Having given up his fight against old age, he feels like he is being gradually encircled by a python.

CONCLUSIONS

This brief review of Tamil literary works created in the post-independence period has demonstrated once more the well-known Tamil, and general Indian, willingness to add the new without discarding the old. However, there were few absolute novelties, change mostly consists in the strengthening of tendencies already discernible in the British period. Greater stress now lies on protest against social restrictions and injustice, character analysis and sexual problems. Totally new, to my knowledge, are themes like the plight of the aged under modern living conditions, western-style work ethic and the cruelty of police. The greatest innovation is the growing literary use of spoken Tamil that has entered nearly all modern prose works, the major exception being those with a historical setting.

Not all authors cited can be called first rate. In some cases my choice was due not to the quality of the literary work but its subject matter. I did, however, prefer to choose writers favoured by Tamil readers. If it be permitted to voice a personal appraisal, I consider the late Janakiraman (born in 1921), Ramamirtham (born in 1916) and Rajanarayanan (born in 1923) the best modern writers. Among this triad I would give the palm to Ramamirtham. I am not, of course, his only admirer. Sivathamby, a professor of Tamil literature, has called him '*the* Tamil writer' (Fatima n.d.), Zvelebil (1973: 112) wrote that 'It is Ramamirtham who has shown us what Tamil is capable of', a Tamil critic claimed that his psychological analysis attains a depth that psychologists have been unable to reach (Ramamirtham 1986: 130). I should like to add that the glimpses Ramamirtham gives us of his strictly ineffable mystic experiences have probably few parallels in the world. He does not deal with ephemeral political matters but writes of himself:

I am concerned with the family of man, with him, his mate and his child forming the trinity of the life principle. Man's love for his family gradually expanding and evolving into love of mankind and ultimately compassion for lifekind in its infinite variety and beauty, in short, I am concerned with the song of the spirit of man.⁷

⁷ Excerpt from the speech that Ramamirtham gave in English on 20.2.1990 when obtaining the award of the Sahitya Akademi.

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