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The Aesthetics of the Heroine's Grief in Kurunthogai

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ABSTRACT

Sangam agam poetry, particularly Kurunthogai, is part of the Ettuthohai collection which shows both union and separation between the hero and the heroine through 400 collected poems. The anthology depicts separation not merely as a phase of love but as a means to attain love, creating a unique aesthetic of grief. This aesthetic can be observed through a close textual analysis of selected poems from Kurunthogai (Vaidehi translations), taking it as a primary text, and employing Kübler-Ross's model of 5 stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance as an exploratory entry point. This framework when situated within the heroine's grief and analysed through the heroine's body positions it as an 'aesthetic medium of grief', where her wasting body itself becomes an aesthetic. The heroine utilises this 'medium' to achieve an aesthetic 'completeness' or 'wholeness', as demonstrated in her gaining happiness in her own love even in the hero's absence. Consequently, these poems reframe Tamil poetics within broader aesthetic discourse illustrating how women fulfill their 'whole love' even in the separation phase subverting prior notions of passivity associated with her in this phase.

Keywords: Tamil aesthetics, *Kurunthogai*, Aesthetics of grief, Heroine's grief, Kübler-Ross

Introduction

The Sangam period, spanning approximately 600 BCE to 300 BCE, yielded a significant body of literature subsequently compiled as Sangam literature consisting of 2,381 poems. These poems are categorized by their overarching themes into 'agam' (love) poems and 'puram' (war) poems. *Kurunthogai*, an *agam* (love)



poems, is an integral component of the *Ettuthohai* collection¹ comprising 400 poems. As an ‘agam’ (love) poem, this collection eloquently portrays the aesthetics of love and separation between hero and the heroine.

T.P. Meenakshisundaram highlights how any aesthetic experience of art and literature is a spiritual experience reaching for the ‘Absolute’ or a sense of completeness and wholeness. This perspective is further emphasized through the Tamil terminology for aesthetics—*Murugiyal*, which refers to both manifestation of artistic beauty and the Absolute. This aesthetic experience can be used to analyse the aesthetics of both love and separation.

Kurunthogai, in particular, exhibits a unique aesthetic of grief situated in the separation phase of love. The poem depicts various stages of grief, which when analysed through Kubler-Ross’s model demonstrates how the heroine reaches a state of acceptance culminating to a state of ‘wholeness’. This ‘completeness’ is achieved through the acceptance of the hero’s enduring absence, with no foreseeable conclusion to the waiting. Thereupon, the ‘aesthetic of grief’, enables autonomy to the heroine over both her love and the stage of separation in love, challenging conventional assumptions that often characterize her sustained, unreciprocated waiting as a passive act.

Kübler-Ross’s Stages of Grief

Elizabeth Kübler Ross in her book ‘On Grief and Grieving’ formulated a model of five stages of grief contextualizing it within the bereavement state after the loss of a loved one. These stages are—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In *Kurunthogai*, the hero’s prolonged absence, especially where the heroine has received no sign of his return, positions this state as an emotional loss rather than a biological one. The focus here is on the heroine’s grief stemming from her deep love which in the dearth of the hero’s presence transforms into sorrow. As Surbhi Parakh notes, the separation phase aestheticizes grief within ‘Neithal thinai’, a landscape that “functions as both a physical [space] and psychological space” (Parakh 129). Consequently, the heroine’s body too becomes a medium of grief in the poems, thereby establishing it as an aesthetic medium.

In the Tamil tradition aesthetics are not just depicted through the heroine’s words but also through her bodily gestures. *Tolkappiyam* calls this *meippatu*, which literally means inner emotions depicted through gestures. As such the body of the heroine becomes a medium to her emotional grief due to the separation. Her emaciated body depicted through her thin wrists and loose bangles illustrates an image similar to that of a grieving person going through the depression stage. Moreover, her description of ‘*pasalai*’², portrays an actual image of a disease in the poems which is being caused due to her grief during separation. Kübler-Ross’s stages map onto these motifs, situating the aesthetic of grief within the heroine’s longing and her hope for the hero’s love and return, framing eternal waiting into an empowered aesthetic of wholeness.

¹ The Sangam poetry are classified under two categories—*Pattuppattu* (ten songs), and *Ettuthohai* (eight anthologies)

² A pale, yellowish-green discolouration of the skin (specifically the forehead or arms) caused by emotional distress

Stage of Denial

Kübler-Ross states denial as the first stage in her five stages model. She describes denial in the grieving as symbolic, rather than literal disbelief where the person is still not able to accept that their loved one is not with them anymore. She states it as an unconscious refusal, “[meaning] you come home and you can’t believe that your wife isn’t going to walk in the door at any minute... You simply can’t fathom that he will never walk through that door again” (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 8). This refusal operates to protect the psyche of the grieving person.

In *Kurunthogai* this denial is performed by the heroine in the beginning phase of her separation from the hero. The heroine refuses to believe that the hero can leave her for long. Her body such as her ‘sleepless eyes’ becomes a medium which represents her denial aesthetic as seen here:

“In the still darkness of night,/ words have died down,/ everybody has sunk into sweet sleep with/ no malice,/ and the whole wide world sleeps./ I certainly am the only one/ who is unable to sleep!” (Kur 6)

The heroine’s refusal to accept the normalcy of the night and of sleeping shows an active denial on her part. She refuses to sleep not only because she is immersed in the memory of the hero but also because she believes that he will return soon and she doesn’t want to miss his return. However, this refusal is unconscious even though she performs it actively; quite similar to the grieving person mentioned above. Her vigil represented through her eyes which are as unyielding as the sea, unconsciously buffers loss, aestheticizing denial as embodied hope that the hero will ‘walk through that door’ any moment.

Stage of Anger

The state of anger as the second stage in the Kübler-Ross method supersedes the first stage. Ross states that the anger of the grieving is hardly rational in nature, and is often directed at misaligned objects, rather than to the source of the issue.

In *Kurunthogai* this is depicted through the heroine’s anger directed towards the ordinary people. The heroine takes a visceral form in these lines:

“Will I hit them?/ Will I attack them?/ Will I scream ‘Ah’ and ‘Ol’ citing/ some reason?/ The swirling wind blows and causes/ me distress, while those in this town/ are sleeping, unaware of my love/ affliction.// I do not know what to do!” (Kur 28).

Here, the violent body of the heroine becomes an aesthetic medium where her grief takes on a ruinous form bringing destruction to those around them. However, in the following lines the path of the anger shifts from outer to inner:

“My tender friend!/ If abandoning one’s partner/ to earn wealth, and/ forgetting love and grace/ is intelligence,/ let him be the intelligent one.// May we be the stupid ones” (Kur 20).



The heroine's stupidity becomes an aesthetic medium here, depicting a side of love that is private to the heroine. As the heroine transitions from the state of denial to anger, grief manifests in a structured manner even when seemingly undirected. This structure, as observed in this context, empowers the heroine with agency and control. In the initial poem mentioned here the heroine's grief grants her independence to transform into a justified violent form, whereas in the subsequent poem her choice of remaining 'stupid' gives her autonomy over her body and love. Consequently, the aesthetic representation of grief, embodied in her 'angry form', serves as a conduit through which she departs from an isolated unconscious stage of grief to an autonomous conscious stage.

Stage of Bargaining

The third stage of Kübler-Ross's model is the most important stage—bargaining. This stage is situated within the griever's hope assuming that while the previous method of anger failed, maybe this will bring the deceased back. This state is often *"accompanied by guilt related to past actions and perceived opportunities where the griever may have been able to prevent the tragedy"* (Sigfrids 7).

In *Kurunthogai* this bargaining is represented through false hopes and guilt of the heroine over her past actions for a hopeful reunion with the hero. Subsequently, the heroine utilises her negotiating ability framing it in her aesthetic of grief to subvert her previous impassiveness. In this poem:

"... I am crying/ alone every day in sorrow; My/ teary eyes have lost their sleep.// Wake up!! Let us escape this loneliness!! Let us go to the country... //I have considered going there even/ though they speak a different language" (Kur 11); the heroine negotiates utilising her body such as *"teary eyes"* and, *"wasting hands"* to bargain for her union with the hero. Even though the action of the heroine traversing dangerous paths filled with *"alien languages (Ramanujan)"* might seem bold, the false hope of reuniting with the hero gives her justification to negotiate with herself and society. Her present actions are unlike her previous one, as she is riddled with the guilt of being impassive before.

Similarly in this poem, the heroine bargains for her union with the hero through her ritualised body represented through her 'threaded wrists' and her wasting body which is unable to stay away from the hero.

"O friend! He is the life of my/ life. I cannot be away from/ him even for a wink of time.// If he is able to forget me/ and capable of staying away,/ I will not make offerings/ to the victorious Kotravai/ in the mountain ranges with/ clefts and caves, nor tie ritual/ thread on my wrist, nor listen/ to omens" (Kur 218).

In these two poems the heroine utilises an active negotiation to bargain with both society and supernatural forces for her union with the hero while simultaneously imposing an assertive agency. In the initial poem, she utilises the justifications provided to her through her grief to take active participation in the process of love rather than just passively waiting. As she negotiates to traverse foreign lands she subverts societal restrictions, gaining active agency. This agency ultimately gives her power to negotiate even against supernatural phenomena such as omens and powerful gods, transcending individual agency to a cosmic power embodied by the heroine's body and her grieving aesthetic. The stage of bargaining does not just stand for a hopeful reunion with the hero but also transcends to a cosmic agency as the heroine transforms from the autonomous conscious stage of anger to an assertive and decisive stage controlling the flow of the love.

Stage of Depression

The stage of depression responds intensely to a great loss. This stage subverts all other stages creating a bridge to the stage of acceptance. As Ross and Kessler state in their paper, “[depression] takes us to a deeper place in our soul that we would not normally explore” (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 24).

In *Kurunthogai*, the depression within the heroine takes an aesthetic medium of the heroine’s wasting body. Her ‘disease-like symptoms’ represented through her thinning wrists, lackluster eyes and delirium positions depression as an aesthetic of grief. As seen in this poem: “*I am worried and alone, with love’s/ painful disease so difficult to bear,/ and my moist eyes with red lines/ drop welled-up tears* (Kur 86)”, the heroine’s reddened eyes, a consequence of her emotional distress, serves as an aesthetic manifestation of her profound grief. The grief, however, transcends mere emotional suffering, encompassing both physical and psychological dimensions. It propels her into a state of delirium, wherein she experiences hallucinations foreshadowing the hero’s return. This delirium persists even in her unconscious state of dreaming as depicted in this poem:

“... *Last night I thought/ my lover, who is a liar,/ was hugging me tightly in a/ false dream that seemed so real.// I woke up from my confusing/ sleep, realizing the situation./ I still found myself caressing/ my mattress// I have become lean and lonely,/ suffering like a blue waterlily/ blossom attacked by bees.// I am pathetic for sure!*” (Kur 30).

The aesthetics of grief as manifested in the heroine’s hallucinations and dreams also becomes the medium through which the heroine navigates her inner desires. As mentioned by Ross, the stage of depression is characterised by an introspective search following external efforts in the previous phases to find solace from grief. In this context, the heroine’s dreams and inner desires become a buffer for her immense grief that culminates after all the previous stages, enabling the heroine to reach an autonomous whole in the subsequent stage of acceptance. While the heroine re-enters an unconscious state, similar to the denial phase of grief, this instance functions as a protection mechanism for her inner psyche, preventing a descent into mania. This subconscious defense positions the heroine as an active agent progressing towards an aesthetic ‘wholeness’ within herself, similar to the state of *Murugiyam* mentioned above, distinct from denial’s passive phase.

Stage of Acceptance

The stage of acceptance as the last stage reinstates loss to the generation of a “new reality”. Ross associates this stage with the process of healing where rather than numbness the bereaved accepts her loss and reality as permanent reality.

In *Kurunthogai* this stage completes the aesthetic cycle of the heroine's grief as her aesthetic experience is represented in her emotional and psychological grief with her body as the medium becomes ‘complete’. This ‘completeness’ is represented in her happiness which she experiences due to her acceptance of the hero’s absence as immutable. She does not lament her wasted body or her waiting, in fact her love for the hero transcends earthly times, gaining cosmic perennality. This can be seen in these lines:

“... She's happy even though she has not had/ any pleasure from him./ She's happy for her friendship with the man/ with a fine chariot from the town with ponds;/ her bangles have stayed tight on her hand” (Kur 61).

Her body which has till now represented the aesthetics of grief, now represents an aesthetic of ‘happiness’. Her returning health is not because of her union with the hero but because of her acceptance of reality, which enables her to gain an emotional completeness in her love even in the absence of the hero. This aesthetic further amplifies in the heroine’s friend’s declaration where she addresses the hero:

“... Even you do not unite with her,/ will her love for you be ruined?/ No! It will not!” (Kur 42).

This active assertion gives the heroine autonomy over her love and her happiness even in the absence of the hero. The aesthetic representation that was through the heroine's wasting body in the earlier sections, is now situated in her ‘full’ heart—her love. The fifth stage of grief enables the heroine to complete her love without a necessary union with the hero. She gains a sense of the ‘Absolute’ through her aesthetic experience in separation as it becomes the phase where the heroine’s independent, self-governed love is performed with her alone deciding when to wait and when to let go.

Conclusion

The aesthetic of grief as exemplified in *Kurunthogai* through the heroine’s body reverts the gender dynamics between the hero and the heroine in the love journey. As the heroine progresses through the five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance—she gains an emotional agency over love. Her primary state of being an unconscious agent transforms to an active, conscious agent finding the ‘Absolute’ within her own love, rather than depending upon the supposed reunion with the hero. The separation, generally depicting the heroine as a passive figure awaiting the hero, becomes a subverted space where the heroine’s separation itself becomes the mode through which she regains agency over her love, utilising her body and gestures as an aesthetic medium of grief.

This aesthetic of grief when situated in the broader Tamil aesthetic and literary aesthetic creates a unique framework where the heroine’s ‘wasting body’ becomes a site of her agency, thus representing that even sorrow can become strength. Moreover this sorrow gains an aesthetic ‘whole’ within the separation phase itself, superseding the binary of separation/union. This leaves ample scope for a comparative study with *sringara rasa* in sanskrit aesthetics analysing the aesthetic of grief as an individual aesthetic sufficient for reaching the ‘Absolute’ or ‘wholeness’.

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