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Specific Features of the Tamil Ballad: *Kucalavaṉ katai* (*The Story of Kusalavan*)

It is a well-known fact that there are quite a number of renderings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in vernacular languages.[1] Two main directions of this process can be outlined: rendering the whole poem or taking up one part of the poem, or only a certain episode. Various literary forms are used by the authors (poems, dramatic pieces, stories, songs etc.) but in all cases the original version (conventionally the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*) is recast, to a greater or smaller extent, according to local traditions and often to a particular social and even political situation. In the words of Romila Thapar, 'The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant the multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations which changed the conceptualization of character, event and meaning'.[2] In fact, the variations concern all levels of compositions: the plot, the treatment of the heroes, the ideological background, descriptive fragments, not to speak of the language, which in a majority of cases tends to be vernacular. In this regard, the most intriguing and interesting problems of literary analysis of such pieces include the changes that were introduced by their authors (known or unknown), their aims and origin, the local material used, as well as the language peculiarities revealed and the like.

In the present article, a description of one of the variant stories based on the *Rāmāyaṇa* is offered. It is *Kucalavaṉ katai* (*The Story of Kusalavan*) in the Tamil language, composed in a form which is usually, by Western and also Indian scholars, defined by the English term 'ballad'. But its original name is *katai*, i.e. *kathā* in Sanskrit ('story'), or *pāṭṭu* ('song'). Such compositions may be based on stories of different origin (classical or folk, pan-Indian or local). They are very popular and performed orally, as a rule, particularly by the so called *villicai* groups—singers and storytellers who accompany themselves by playing a string

1 For more see Paula Richman (ed.), *Many Rāmāyṇas. The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

2 Quoted by P. Richman in *Many Rāmāyṇas*, p. 4.

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of a bow (*vil*) and beating bells and small drums. If the stories happen to be written down on palm-leaves or printed on paper, they do not have names of either composers or performers.

The manuscript (or, rather, manuscripts) of *Kucalavaṉ katai*, whose author is also unknown, was published twice. It was initially brought out by the International Institute of Tamil Studies and edited by Irā. Vacumati.[3] One more edition (with English translation) was undertaken by the Institute of Asian Studies.[4] There are a number of discrepancies between both editions (including the titles) but the bulk of the story is the same. What strikes the eye, however, is the beginning of the pieces. The first variant was obviously edited by somebody who tried to shape it as a sort of a medieval poem with all the necessary traditional preliminary parts: the glorification of a god (Śiva in this case), homage (Tamil *tuti* < Sanskrit *stuti*) to other gods (Gaṇapati, Sarasvatī, Nārāyaṇa, family gods), to parents, to the teacher. The second variant of the story is lacking all these.

The story is based on the events of the last part of the epic poem (the *Uttarakāṇḍa*). In short, it runs as follows:

> Rāma is back in Ayodhyā. He enquiries Bharata about the life of its citizens, then summons them to him and tells them to bring the gourds needed for a rite devoted to his father's memory. Then he distributes the gourd seeds among them and gives one to Hanumān. With the passing of time only Hanumān's seed produced fruit, an enormous gourd. Rāma orders those who failed to grow gourds to bring gold in a quantity equal to the weight of Hanumān's gourd. The citizens are angered by Rāma and leave in tears. He wants to find out what people think of him and decides to walk along the streets of Ayodhyā in disguise. That night he overhears the agitated conversation between a washerman (*vaṇṇaṉ*) and his wife, accusing her of unfaithfulness. In the course of the quarrel, the situation with Sītā is unpleasantly mentioned.
> Meanwhile Kaikeyī who also suspects Sītā of infidelity instigates her to draw a picture of Rāvaṇa. Sītā says that she has never seen him, but even so draws Rāvaṇa's portrait. Rāma returns home and she hides it under the bed. Rāma finds the picture and when a drop of his sweat falls on it, Rāvaṇa is resurrected. Rāma once more has to fight and kill him. He scolds Sītā and in anger orders Lakṣmaṇa to take her to the forest and kill her with his magic sword. Lakṣmaṇa defies Rāma and, in the forest, Sītā gives birth to a child who is named Kucalavaṉ and then raised by Vālmīki. One day, when Vālmīki was absent, she takes the boy from the *āśrama* and Vālmīki, thinking that Kucalavaṉ is lost, creates another child, Acalavaṉ, out of the *darbha* grass. The

3 *Kucalavar cuvāmi katai*, Patippāciriyar irā. vacumati, Ceṉṉai: Ulakat tamiḻ ārāycci niṟuvaṉam, 1995.

4 *Kucalavaṉ katai*. *The Story of Kusalavan*, general editor G. John Samuel, ed. G. Selva Lakshmi, R. Jayalakshmi, English rendering D. Thomas, Cheṉṉai: Institute of Asian Studies, 2006.

> grown-up brothers are described as great heroes and later enter a fight with Hanumān for the horse which emerged during a sacrifice conducted by Rāma. The brave boys beat Hanumān and then defeat Rāma's army. In the end, they are identified as Rāma's children but they refuse to go to Ayodhyā and return with their mother to the *āśrama*.

Even such a schematic presentation of the plot (with some episodes omitted) shows that it differs considerably from Vālmīki's poem as well as from the classical Tamil poem *Irāmavatāram* by Kampaṉ.[5] Some principle events such as Sītā's exile, the birth of children, their life and studies in Vālmīki's *āśrama* are preserved but they are treated quite originally and supplemented with several new episodes. In fact, this is a piece of literature in its own right, saturated with attitudes and problems which the creators and the performers (who, in principle, may coincide) considered interesting and topical for their audience.

First of all, it is clear from the very beginning that the figure of Rāma is not presented in a favourable light. True, the story does contain a certain glorification of him; various traditional names and epithets of Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa are applied to his figure (Perumāḷ, Nārāyaṇaṉ, Hari, Acyuta, Kōpāl, Tirumāl, Māyavaṉ etc.), and he is certainly recognized as the *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, but his image on the whole is considerably humbled and human weaknesses prevail in his character. Even his martial bravery is doubted and crumbles when he encounters his sons on the battlefield. In the episode with his citizens, he is cunning and cruel; when he finds Rāvaṇa's portrait his reaction is close to hysterical. He exclaims:

> Is it proper to draw a picture of dead Rāvaṇa and make him return?
> Is it proper to draw a picture of the gone Rāvaṇa which [makes him] come again?
> How much did I suffer during the war with Rāvaṇa!
> Is it proper to depict Rāvaṇa with a crown which is worshipped by kings?[6]

These rhetoric questions obviously disclose Rāma's wounded ego, which screens his other emotions. Only at the end of his monologue does he reproach Sītā for staying in Rāvaṇa's realm:

> You, who lived with the wild *rākṣasa*, be away from my eyes, be gone!

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5 *Kamparāmāyaṇam: Irāmavatāram*, nāṅkām accu, Ceṉṉai: Kampaṉ kaḻakam, 1984.

6 *cettiṟantupōṉa Rāvaṇaṉait tirumpappaṭattil eḻutalāmō / māṇṭiṟantupōṉa Rāvaṇaṉai maṟuttumpaṭattil eḻutalāmō / Rāvaṇacammārap pōrmuṭikka nāṉum ettaṉai pāṭupaṭṭēṉ / tēcaracarkaḷ vaṇaṅkuvarō tirumuṭitaṉṉait tarikkalāmō*; *Kucalavaṉ katai*, p. 66.

> You, who was beside the king of Laṅkā, do not stand in front of me, be gone![7]

Rāma even tries to commit suicide but his three mothers manage to pacify him. Instead he intends to punish Sītā with the utmost cruelty. Incidentally, later, when Sītā is found alive in the forest, he denies his faults and blames his brother Lakṣmaṇa for all the misfortunes.

One of the main problems in Tamil folk creations which attracts attention of the performers (as well as of the audience) is the problem of family interrelations. In this case it manifests as the Rāma-Sītā conflict. To be more precise, the central motif of the story is the feminine conjugal chastity, a notion which is extremely significant for the traditional Tamil culture. It is known under the term *kaṟpu* and is eulogized in many pieces of Tamil literature (for instance, in the sixth chapter of *Tirukkuṟaḷ*).[8] In this connection an interesting and telling detail which stresses the importance of *kaṟpu* might be mentioned. In Tamil readings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāvaṇa in order not to touch Sītā abducts her by lifting the lump of ground and the hut near which she stands. This detail was introduced, perhaps, by Kampaṉ[9] who understood that the idea of a male physically touching a married woman was absolutely unacceptable for the Tamil audience. In this story, Kaikeyī before asking Sītā to draw a picture of Rāvaṇa reminds her the events connected with Sītā's abduction by Rāvaṇa and says: 'he lifted you with the soil to the chariot' (*maṇṇōṭe uṉṉait tēril ēṟṟi*).[10]

Interestingly enough, the episode with the portrait is well known in the South and appears, for instance, in Telugu songs. But its treatment is a little bit different: it is Śūrpaṇakhā who came to Sītā disguised as a hermit and asks her to draw Rāvaṇa's figure. Sītā complies with the request but draws only Rāvaṇa's feet and Śūrpaṇakhā herself completes the picture.[11] Generally speaking, the motif of drawing a portrait of a beloved person is a commonplace in Indian literature. Here it is connected with Śūrpaṇakhā's lust for Rāma. It is known that she was rejected and insulted by him and she looks for revenge by means of slandering Sītā. Besides, being jealous of her, she intends to make Sītā and Rāma

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7 *kāṭṭarakkaṉōṭu vāḻntavaḷtāṉ kaṇṇilmuḻiyātē appuṟampō / ilaṅkaivēntanōṭu cērntavaḷtāṉ eṉmuṉṉillātē appuṟampō*; *Kucalavaṉ katai*, p. 67

8 The meaning of the term *kaṟpu* is discussed in: Alexander M. Dubianski, *Ritual and Mythological Sources of the Early Tamil Poetry*, Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1999, pp. 127–129.

9 *Kamparāmāyaṇam*, p. 532 (lines 3386–3390).

10 *Kucalavaṉ katai*, p. 59.

11 Velcheru Narayana Rao, 'A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu', in *Many Rāmāyaṇas*, p. 126.

fight. In the Tamil story, the active figure is Kaikeyī who obviously lusts for Rāvaṇa and is also jealous of Sītā—she is sure that Sītā was Rāvaṇa's lover. Thus, again the Tamil version switches from a mythological epic to family matters.

Taking into consideration the importance of the notion of *kaṟpu* to Tamil culture, Rāma's cruelty to Sītā, perhaps, can be explained in terms of a certain counterbalance to her alleged infidelity. On the other hand, the folk story obviously tends to blame Rāma for his abuse of Sītā. In the above-mentioned episode, Lakṣmaṇa reproaches Rāma and says:

> Chastity never was destroyed. Virgin Sītā must not be cut down.
> The way of *kaṟpu* is difficult. Oh, you with the complexion of the rain-cloud!
> Sītā must not be cut down. It is a fault to harm women. The elders won't accept it.
> Oh, Perumāḷ, my hand will not rise to cut down the woman Sītā'.[12]

Sītā is referred to in the story as 'the germ of chastity' (*kaṟpu cūṭāmaṇi*), 'the precious garland of chastity' (*kaṟpu maṇi mālai*). Lakṣmaṇa, who brings Sītā to the forest, believes that since her chastity is not destroyed neither tiger nor bear can kill her. Indeed, she is quite safe in the forest and, moreover, Varuṇa, Vāyu, snakes, wild animals and birds worship and guard her. In a way Sītā's stay in the wilderness can be considered as another trial of her marital fidelity which she successfully undergoes.

One more feature of the story that attracts our attention is its discernible Śaivite overtones. This, of course, does not mean that the Vaiṣṇava background of the story is diminished. As I have already mentioned, Rāma is recognized as Viṣṇu's *avatāra* and in some places he is worshipped. Bharata is sometimes named as Bharatāḻvār (following Kampaṉ's *Irāmavatāram*) but there are many facts that disclose the authors' inclination towards Śiva.[13] In the second part of the story describing the events in the forest, the goddess Bhadrakāḷi appears. Sītā asks Vālmīki to bring the goddess to her, explaining that she is her relative, which is indeed true because according to Tamil mythology Bhadrakāḷi (otherwise Durgā or Koṟṟavai) is a younger sister of Tirumāl, that is Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa or Rāma (*Māyavar taṅkai Pattirakāli*).[14] Vālmīki summons her and she comes as a

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12 *kaṟpu orunāḷum aḻiyavillai. kaṉṉi Cītaiyai veṭṭa vēṇṭām / kaṟpuneṟiyatu pollātu. kārvaṇṇā Cītaiyai veṭṭa vēṇṭām / peṇpāvam piḻai tarumē. periyavarukkum ēlātu / peṇṇāḷ Cītaiyai veṭṭutaṟku perumāḷe eṉakkuk kaivarumō*; *Kucalavaṉ katai*, p. 71.

13 In another variant of the story mentioned earlier the text begins with the glorification of Śiva (*kaṭavuḷ vāḻttu*).

14 *Kucalavaṉ katai*, p. 97.

midwife and helps Sītā to deliver a child. She gives Sītā medicine, rocks the cradle and sings a lullaby to the child. Later she appears in disguise as a hunchback woman before the brothers (Kucalavaṉ and Acalavaṉ), tells them about their origin and gives them the sacred Śaivite ashes (*tirunīṟu*). Then Śiva himself appears on the scene, having heard about the wild hunt the brothers undertook in the forest. He orders Yāma to fetch them but Yāma gets frightened. Śiva goes to Ayodhyā as an old brahmin, meets Rāma and reproaches him for the absence of wife in his house. He says: 'Will Vedic people eat in the house where there is no hostess?' (*maṉaiyāṭṭi yillāta maṉaiyatilē maṟaiyōr amutu pucikkalāmō*) and leaves for Kailāsa.[15]

The example of the *Kucalavaṉ katai* shows that it is a good case of a rendering a pan-Indian story by a local folk tradition. We see that the creators of the story (nameless authors and performers) feel free to introduce considerable changes into a well-known plot, to invent and add new episodes, to accentuate certain elements. The sources of changes and additions are many and varied: universal folk motifs, local stories and songs, *bhakti* hymns and local mythology, even classical poetic tradition. Everything is combined and melted in the flexible creative process by local poets and performers, which certainly deserves further investigations.

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15 *Kucalavaṉ katai*, p. 127.