Poetry, Identity and the Workings of the Literary Field: 
Arul Cellaturai and his Pillaittamil to the Child Jesus

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In 1982, renowned sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu published *Le champ littéraire*, a theoretical method of analysis of literary works. For Bourdieu, literary works must be understood as cultural works, produced within a field of power. Art – including literature – is for him a social game, in which the players seek to accumulate “symbolic capital,” or, more specifically, recognition (which can be cultural, social or economic). The literary field is a relational and differential system, in which symbolic capital is negotiated between validating institutions and agents. The literary field therefore interposes itself between the literary work and society, reflecting and refracting the relationship between the two.

Bourdieu’s theory leads to the conclusion that literary works are a product of two factors: first, the possibilities available to the author within the field, stylistically and formally; and secondly, his or her position within the field, which will incline him or her to make certain choices, given the available possibilities. I believe that Bourdieu’s analytic method can be useful for our study of Arul Cellaturai, an Indian poet who chose to adopt a specific poetic style in his search for recognition within the field of power. In the present analysis, I will analyse the distinct stylistic and formal choices and the socio-political milieu within which Cellaturai writes in order to show how these choices are shaped by the desire to be recognized culturally, socially.

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3 Ibid.
4 Bourdieu, “Champ littéraire,” [Abstract].
and economically. I will look at the particular factors that pushed him to embrace the Sangam style, and the reception he received from the literary and non-literary communities. And finally, I will argue that Cellaturai’s prise-de-position in the literary field reflects a particular understanding of Tamil identity as pluralist, which he articulates and shapes in a dialectical process.

**Arul Cellaturai and the Sangam Literary Tradition**

Arul Cellaturai is a 20th century poet and engineer from Tamil Nadu. He is also a faithful Catholic. As a poet, Cellaturai’s work can be located within the Sangam literary tradition. The word “sangam” can be translated as “academy of scholars or poets.” Sangam literature refers to a collection of poems written in South India between 300 BCE and 300 CE by a multitude of authors of different professions and social classes. This poetry is still considered by some as the best Tamil literature ever produced. Cellaturai was a great admirer of this classical poetic style and sought to emulate it in his own writings. He was not the only Tamil poet of his day to prefer this ancient style, as he discovered when he was introduced to the *Thenmozhi* (Words of Honey) magazine. *Thenmozhi* was a Tamil Nationalist magazine associated with the Tanittamil Iyakkam, or the Only Tamil Movement. Supporters of this Indian language movement preferred the Sangam style because it represented an “unadulterated Tamil language.” Cellaturai and his contemporaries therefore sought to write only in Tamil and to imitate as much as possible this style which represented an idealized vision of Tamil identity.

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8 Ibid.
The *Thenmozhi* magazine, like the classical sangam, provided a locus for writers and philosophers within the Only Tamil Movement to share ideas with the public and with one another. In part because of this magazine, the language movement gained considerable popularity in the 20th century. So, the Sangam style moved from a restricted, elite literary circle, back into the sphere of mass production. According to Bourdieu’s theory, this magazine is one of the literary institutions that shaped and provided validation for Cellatturai’s work. Bourdieu’s theory helps us to understand the complexities of Cellaturai’s choice of writing, as shaped by both his own personal interests and the demands of the dominant culture. On the one hand, Cellatturai admired the classical style before encountering this validating institution. However, without the Only Tamil Movement and *Thenmozhi* to publish his works, writing in the Sangam style would not have been a feasible way to reach the larger public. Paula Richman says that Cellaturai sighed with relief when he discovered the magazine, admitting that he “felt hope that it was possible to continue the literary work which had ceased to exist long back”. According to Bourdieu, the author’s autonomy is proportionate to the public for which he/she is writing, as is his/her economic capital. In the field of mass production (le sous-champ de la grande production) this autonomy is restricted by the demands of the larger public, who expect the author to conform to certain more traditional forms. In this particular case, these expectations included a strict adherence to the rules of the Only Tamil movement, in so far as language and style were concerned. In order to be accepted into this literary circle, Cellaturai was forced to adopt these rules, which he may or may not have had an interest in doing

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otherwise. Thus, Cellatturai’s case allows us to see how the literary field both restricts and enables the author’s writing style.

Typically, restricted autonomy results in increased economic capital but decreased recognition by other writers within the scholarly community. In this particular case, however, Cellaturai actually gains both forms of recognition. The Only Tamil movement, like many political movements, had the effect of bringing together the elites and the masses, in a common vision of identity. The Sangam style, which would otherwise have been an elite form, limited to a smaller public, entered into the field of mass production because it represented the ideals of Tamil Nationalism. Thus, this particular political landscape provided the ideal climate for Cellaturai to publish classical Tamil poetry and have it received by both literary elites and non-elites. This will be important when we look at Cellaturai’s work as crossing and redefining social boundaries.

**Transcending Identity Boundaries**

Language movements in India often have the effect of bringing to light religious, social, political and class divisions. The emphasis on Tamil language and classical culture naturally emphasizes the difference between Tamil and non-Tamil speakers in India, between all those who do and do not self-identify with Tamil classical culture. While the constraints of the literary field led Cellaturai to adopt a Tamil nationalist position in his writing, he did not limit himself to this political stance when articulating a vision of identity. By looking at one of his bestselling works, a Pillaiattamil to the Baby Jesus, I will show how Cellatturai uses poetry to express and shape his own vision of Indian identity while staying within the Sangam tradition.

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In *Extraordinary Child*, Paula Richman states: “It is one thing to compose a pillaittamil within one or more already established communities of sentiment, but it is another kind of task to envision an extraordinary child *as a way* of uniting a community of sentiment.”¹³ In this statement Richman identifies two distinct ways in which poetry relates to social identity. In the first case, poetry is a form that allows the poet to situate himself in one or multiple distinct social groupings. In a second sense, poetry can be the locus for creating a new “community of sentiment.” In both cases, the poet at once affirms social boundaries and helps to transcend them.

Cellaturai voluntarily situates himself within multiple groups. Politically, we have seen that his poetry conforms to the mandates of the Only Tamil Movement, in so far as style and language are concerned. In his Pillaittamil, he is careful not to use any words borrowed from English or Sanskrit, even though these are commonly in usage in Tamil Nadu. For example, Richman shows how Cellaturai “coin[ed] his own Tamil words to describe various scientific terms.”¹⁴ On a religious level, Cellaturai himself identifies with the Christian faith and his pillaittamil – offered in praise of the Baby Jesus – reflects his Christian identity. The Pillaittamil is a genre that has traditionally been adopted by poets of all faiths. Richman states that the “religious pluralism of the pillaittamil tradition reflects the religious pluralism of the Tamil-speaking population.”¹⁵ Thus, while Cellaturai’s Christianity may make him part of a minority group, he has strategically chosen to express his religious views through a genre that promotes religious diversity as a legitimate aspect of Tamil identity. Cellaturai also identifies with the scientific community. He is an engineer and has a particular interest in modern technological

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¹³ Richman, *Extraordinary Child*, 221.
¹⁴ Ibid., 163.
¹⁵ Ibid., 3 – 4.
advancements. He is the first to represent scientific themes in a Pillaittamil, desiring to create a poem that represented and spoke to his lived reality.\(^\text{16}\)

While he is affirming that these diverse social groupings do exist, by expressing all of these identities at once in a Pillaittamil, Cellaturai in fact weakens the boundaries between them. For him, there is not simply a plurality of identities within Indian society. Each person’s identity is in fact multi-faceted. Richman begins her book by stating that “the pillaittamil is a genre built on multiples: multiple verses, multiple sections, multiple poems, and multiple religious affiliations.”\(^\text{17}\) Intrinsic to the structure of this poem, therefore, is the notion of plurality and diversity that is at the core of Cellaturai’s conception of Tamil identity. In the individual, multiple identities can coexist in harmony or in tension with one another.

Often, it is within the individual rather than within society that seemingly incompatible beliefs and interests come together. For example, one of the strongest arguments against the perceived conflict between religion and science in the West comes from the testimonies of famous religious men and women or scientists who have an equal appreciation of and devotion to the other discipline. Cellaturai’s work similarly forces the reader to see that Catholicism and science are not incompatible. Of greater interest to us is that Cellatturai’s poem forces the reader to accept that Catholic identity is compatible with Indian identity. By expressing the complexity of his own identity through a genre that is recognized as authentically Tamil, Cellatturai is making the claim that Christianity and modern science are just as authentically Tamil as the form and language he is using.

The degree to which Christians are authentically accepted as Indian citizens continues to be an issue of contention in India. Proponents of Hindutva have argued that while Indian

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\(^{16}\) Ibid., 163.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 3.
Christians may be of Indian descent and may look upon India as their Fatherland, they cannot be considered Hindu because they do not look upon India as their holy land as well.\textsuperscript{18} The Holy Land of the Christians is in Palestine, and so “their love is divided.”\textsuperscript{19} I believe that Cellaturai’s poem addresses this charge directly, through the indigenization of the child Jesus.

\textit{Iyecupiran Pillaittamil: Indigenization of the Christian Faith}

In \textit{Iyecupiran Pillaittamil}, the Christ Child is portrayed as a Tamil youth, alongside other traditional Indian symbols and imagery.\textsuperscript{20} In one paruvam, Baby Jesus is depicted playing with a peacock. Richman remarks on the similarity between this image of Christ and between Murukan, who is perhaps the most important Tamil deity.\textsuperscript{21} Cellaturai places Jesus in a Tamil setting, in a traditional Tamil poem, and represents him in a way that makes him strikingly similar to a Tamil deity. Fr. Hieronymus, who wrote the preface for Cellaturai’s book, suggests that this is the “author’s attempt to envision Jesus born in Tamil Nadu.”\textsuperscript{22} I suggest that Cellaturai has an interest in indigenizing the Christ figure precisely because it makes Christianity more authentically Indian. Theologically, God would have been capable of sending his son anywhere, says Richman.\textsuperscript{23} Cellaturai’s poem helps the reader imagine that Christ could just as easily have come to Tamil Nadu, and in fact that he might do so at his second coming. If so, would Tamil people not be able to claim India as their Holy Land? Furthermore, Cellaturai states that “Jesus continues to be born every moment in the mind of his devotees as they think of

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Ibid.
\item Richman, \textit{Extraordinary Child}, 166.
\item Ibid., 170.
\item Ibid., 166.
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him, singing a pillaittamil.”24 By extrapolation, the true Holy Land of a Christian is not any physical place, but wherever Jesus happens to be. And when a pillaittamil is sung to Christ, he is born again in that place where he is worshipped. Thus, it is precisely through Tamil literature, both theoretically and actually, that Cellaturai can claim India, and particularly Tamil Nadu, as Holy Land for Christians.

The first reading of his poem shows clearly his intention in writing the Pillaittamil: he gave the first recitation and explanation of his poem for two friends, one Hindu and the other Christian, under a banyan tree.25 The banyan tree, which is the national tree of India, has deep religious significance in India. Many well-known religious figures and deities have been portrayed sitting silently or teaching under the banyan tree. By choosing to read his poem for the first time under a banyan tree, Cellaturai is claiming this symbol as a Christian one also. In association with this powerful religious and national symbol, he is tying his poetry and all that it represents into Indian religious identity.

What Cellaturai has effectively done is taken a genre with a very rigid structure, with specific, highly stylized poetic conventions and with a strong connection to Tamil identity to express an inclusive, multi-layered conception of identity through which Christianity could be legitimately accepted as Indian. Furthermore, it is not only through the content of his poem that Cellaturai transcends boundaries, but through its presentation. Richman suggests that it was the poem’s presentation ceremony that allowed it initially to “cross boundaries of Tamil reading communities.”26 She tells us that the book-releasing ceremony (a common celebration held for traditional poetry) “establishes [a work] in a community of appreciative readers.”27 The book-

24 Ibid., 167.
25 Ibid., 160.
26 Ibid., 161.
27 Ibid.
releasing ceremony was held at the city’s Tamil Sangam, a “state-wide literary association” and was attended by “literary savants, members active in Catholic education and publishing, friends, and the poet’s family members”: clearly a “wider audience than just the Tamil Catholic community.”\footnote{Ibid.} We have already seen that the diversity of his audience can be attributed in part to the favorable socio-political landscape that placed Sangam literature in both the elite and public spheres. But the Tamil Sangam in particular provided a space in which members of different social groups, both elite and non-elite, could come together to appreciate a piece of literature that appealed to them on different levels. Through their common literary interest, a new “community of sentiment” was formed between people with otherwise distinct social, religious and political views. Furthermore, because this piece of poetry brings together different aspects of a single person’s identity, the reader is forced to contend with the congruence of these positions. Thus, both the poem itself and the book-release ceremony force members of these groups to encounter the other as related to and harmonious with the self, rather than as a distinct or threatening force. Cellaturai’s poem reminds us of diversity’s positive potential to enrich, redefine and complicate identity.

The poem’s hybridized community of reception provides a space in which Cellaturai can evangelize. As a Christian, the boundary-crossing potential of his work is essential to his evangelistic mission. He is happy to see that the well-known Tamil figures who wrote prefaces to his book, though non-Christians, all “admired the good qualities of [the] Lord Jesus.”\footnote{Ibid., 166.} It is his hope that the highly diversified readers of his book will also come to see the “greatness of Lord Jesus” through his work.\footnote{Ibid., 158.} This may be part of the reason why he goes to such great lengths to make his text accessible. Cellaturai is aware that the genre he has chosen is an elite literary
genre which, in spite of its renewed popularity, may be difficult for some readers to grasp. In order for this not to be an obstacle to its reception by the larger public, he goes to great lengths to make his poem accessible to all readers, providing literary, religious and scientific explanations and references throughout. Ultimately, he is very successful: within five years, the thousand printed copies of his book were sold out, with three-hundred copies being purchased by local libraries.\textsuperscript{31} These figures testify to the popularity of the book in both high-literary and public circles.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In summary, Cellaturai has chosen to consciously situate himself in a particular niche within the literary field and to use the operation of the field to his advantage. In keeping with Bourdieu, abiding by the rules and constraints of the classical poetic style guarantees Cellaturai recognition and success via the validating institutions in his community. It is because of these institutions that he is able to reach the audience he desires and ultimately to form a new community of readers, reaped from different social groups. The constraints of classical poetry allow Cellaturai to effectively fuse his social and religious positions to Tamil identity, through a form of literature already recognized and associated with authentic Tamil culture. Thus, Cellaturai effectively uses a rigid poetic style in order to articulate a pluralist Tamil identity, in which Christianity has a legitimate place.

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 160-161.}
Bibliography


