Post Colonial Study of Folk Narratives Through Indigenous Theory
-Prof. S. Carlos

In underdeveloped countries like India, the methodologies enjoyed in Social Sciences are mostly the Western ones. The scholars of Indian Social Sciences tend to imitate the Western Concepts, tools and methods in their study of Eastern Societies forgetting that they are involved in the study of a different kind of society.

Due to the awareness of post-colonial understanding and search for new methodologies, there is a change of emphasis in the prevailing orientation of Social Sciences, be it Economics, Sociology or Folklore. Levi-Strauss and Louis Althusser, have in different ways, lent support to the idea of employing different methods, in studying and conceptualizing cultures in underdeveloped societies on the basis of refashioning their respective fields of studies, in Anthropology and Marxism. Levi-Strauss had to reorient anthropological studies based on the findings of linguistics and Althussar had to rephrase the Marxist theories using the latest findings of different modern disciplines. Thus they both were driven by the urge to update their knowledge according to diachronic needs.

The intellectuals of the underdeveloped countries took this cue and have been developing their own intellectual and theoretical tools in order to provide alternate strategies of study in their respective fields as this amounts to engaging synchronically with another social reality of the world.

This is perhaps the reason why people started doubting the efficacy of binary opposition, an important principle of Levi-Strauss to tackle our cultural problems. Here, Jean Baudrillard's criticism of Levi-Strauss seems to be appropriate as he finds that Levi-Strauss unduly stretched the binary idea to the primitive societies. This binary opposition which plays a main role in the analysis of myths, now tends to expose its philosophical vulnerability.

The mind-body Cartesian opposition which paved the way for the emergence of different binary styles of conceptual formations like super-structure and basic structure in the
Marxist problematic, informs the traditional Tamil distinction *akam* and *puram*. Since the mind-body distinction proves to be inadequate in the modern context of theoretical debates, particularly in the wake of Structuralist and Post-structuralist understanding of Social Sciences, we tend to question the traditional binary disposition of *akam-puram* opposition, and look forward to more sophisticated theoretical tools to interpret the traditional Tamil binary theory.

At this point it will be useful to refer to an attempt to interpret the traditional Tamil binary opposition in two areas. One is an attempt to study the elementary narrative mode as being a space defined as existing when *akam* theme shifts its potential towards its opposite theme *puram*. This is amply borne out by the poet who wrote one of the earliest narrative poems, *Nedunalvadai* in Tamil. We arrive at this understanding by way of studying this poetic theme structurally.

Another instance of the application of *akam* and *puram* as a classificatory tool is an article written by the late A.K. Ramanujan. Ramanujan, in a bid to dispel the Western method of Folklore classification, tried to use and develop the Tamil concepts of *akam* and *puram* to understand the Indian Folk tales. It is noteworthy that the classification so far adopted by Aarne and Thompson, although works well, is not very adequate theoretically. So, the attempt made by A.K. Ramanujan, then a Tamil Professor in an American University, needs to be examined by Indian Folklorists, although this Tamil concept is unknown to North Indian Folklorists.

But the effort made in this paper is not wholly towards that end. Here we try to bring out the theoretical potential of *akam* and *puram* emphasizing that it entails a thorough revamping of the existing set or beliefs and understanding of this binary concept, particularly in the Tamil scholarly circles.

A.K. Ramanujan, while adhering to the traditional understanding of this oppositional concept, arrived at a novel method of application of this binary category to Kannada and Tamil folklore. Folktales, mostly told by women to children, according to Ramanujan, may be classified into *akam* themes. The tales about family, household, sibling rivalry, growing-up, love, separation and re-union are classified under *akam* category. Myths are brought under *puram* theme. He points out that there are no mother-in-law tales in Hindu mythology and no epic wars and churning of the ocean in Indian Folktales.
While Ramanujan tries to fashion *akam* and *puram* categorization as a new type of folkloristic classificatory principle, the other attempt aims to interpret *akam* and *puram* according to another theoretical formulation. The binary quality of *akam* and *puram* is here taken to mean that this pair also can present its opposite, that is, a false binary pair. Going one step further, we shall make use of an observation made by Frederic Jameson, that the binary oppositional structure is a kind of 'arrested dialectic'. Jameson sees that there is dynamism in the concept of binary pair. Likewise, if one sees the basic Tamil phonological categorization on the basis of short and long vowels (*Kuril* and *Nedil*) the difference is based not on contrast, as modern Linguistics suggests, but on count of *matras*. This lends a theoretical cue to differentiate two levels of difference, one, the difference in time and the other, a difference in space. The Tamil alphabet is based on differentiation in time. The difference in time is understood as events arranged sequentially and the difference in space as events represented as opposed to each other. Now the question is what type of difference does the binary pair *akam* and *puram* represent. What follows as the epistemological base for the theoretical formulation of this paper is that of both. But as the spatial dimension is overstressed, in the structuralist studies of the West, there is necessity to emphasize the time dimension.

A comparison between the Chinese thought categories *yin* and *yang* with *akam* and *puram* bears fruit. *Yin* and *yang*, like the Tamil categories represent the natural as well as the social and psychological ordering of the world and human interests. These two categorizations *yin* and *yang* similar to the Tamil categorization, divide time and space; the time into 'big time' (*perumpozhudu*) like spring, summer, autumn etc., and 'small time' (*sirupozhudu*) as morning, noon, evening etc. This shows that the Chinese categorization like the Tamil one represents the epistemological categories that lie behind the binary manifestations. Since we are able to relate the difference between *akam* and *puram* in terms of time, the cyclical movement, as has been said to have existed in the conceptualization of *yin* and *yang*, can be posited to *akam* and *puram* conception also. The scholars who find a different kind of scientific mode of thought in these Chinese systems do acknowledge when we venture in search of alternate categories and methodologies to study our Culture and society. *Akam* and *puram* evokes a new kin of thinking and thus provides a repetitive and cyclical time representation of thought.

Here what we aim at is to bring home the idea that the two terms *akam* and *puram* have
varied significations and associations, when they represent the temporal signification of categories.

Thus, the Tamil categories signify a non-oppositional thesis – an antithesis proposition showing a tendency of synthesis although it is not actual synthesis. Thus the relational opposition between *akam* and *puram* embody repetition, a new concept which gains importance in one of Edward Said's essays. Repetition comes to relate things mainly on an ambiguous plane though the distinction between the opposing terms *akam* and *puram* are not blurred entirely. Repetition here means not a mere repetitive occurrence but a change whose major traits are repeated.

II

In the background of the above observations, let us see how best the *akam* and *puram* as theoretical formulation can throw light on Indian and Tamil Folklore Research.

In the repetitive frame of thought, the play of memory is given primary importance, that is, in repetition there is no unlimited creativity. Usually repetition is explained with the example of the relation father has with his son. Here one could recognize a difference as well as a similarity, and a correspondence as well as a contradiction. *Akam* and *puram* perhaps reveal this kind of signification. When we come to Tamil Folklore, the evidence it gives with regard to the problematic of the concept of influence one culture (i.e. Western culture) has over the other, paves the way for a new epistemology of underdeveloped societies and cultures. As against the much publicized stand of the Indian intellectual Ashish Nandy that the colonial culture has entirely deformed our cultural entities beyond recognition, the study of this problematic through Folklore throws a different light. A ballad called *Vellaikarankathai (The Story of the Whiteman)*, deals with a European’s life story and ends up depicting this character as one of the village deities. This village deity, *Vellaikaran* is offered cigarettes, mutton, chicken, whisky and brandy as “offering” from the devotees. A rifle is kept as the weapon in the temple which is devoted to the deity. The appearance of the deity with the full honor of long robes, with trousers and shirt, cap and boots bears testimony that an alien trait of a Western culture can integrate with another entirely different culture. The verses of this ballad give the details obviously mentioning the name of London. A brief account of this story of this ballad recounts that the foreigner was drowned in the sea due to the sacrilege he committed by cutting and using a tree
which had been the abode of a powerful deity. The multicultural traits gets embedded in folk narrativity that solely rests on the comprehension that native people nursed for centuries together. The native belief finds a repetitive occurrence in the folk narration which is centered around a foreigner. Thus a circular narrative impulse arises to envelop a natural event such as the unnatural death of this foreigner, to give rise to a ballad. Likewise the elevation of this foreigner as a folk deity by the villagers throws up avenues for a lot of theoretical explanations.

As we pursue to probe the theoretical potentialities of the binary pair of the akam and puram the circularity that these opposing concepts propose due to their binary nature (binary is usually conceived spatially and thereby it represents repetition and circularity) has to be delineated. Since akam and puram designate a circular movement, the Western trait as in the case of the Tamil ballad comes in contact with it, establishes an associative relation with the encircling power grid of the circular movement. Thus the Western trait is translated into the Folk epistemological language of local culture. This is how a foreigner becomes a village deity who later becomes one of the pantheon deities of the Lord of Lords as it happens mostly in all Tamil ballads. What is theoretically important is that two opposing cultures, the Western and Eastern ones find a non-contradictory ambiance developing between them, when a structural readjustment accommodates alien cultural traits. This is perhaps the reason Indian culture offers no explanation as to why Indian culture does not have the space to respect the 'other' as always the 'other'; instead, it identifies and understands the 'other' as its own.

Now, we would take up the problem of the concept of version of a tale myth or ballad. Levi-Strauss does not distinguish the version of a myth from the original one. He says, “Our method thus eliminates a problem which has, so far, been one of the main obstacles to the progress of mythological studies, namely, the quest for the true versions or the earlier ones”\(^{12}\). Like the understanding that akam and puram categories are more complex and the oppositional tension that is present in this pair gives a repetitive mode of expression as in the case of yin and yang binary can be used to study the problem of versions. Folklore structures of duplication and triplication etc. according to Levi-Strauss, occurs as a result of the inner structure finding a place on the surface of the folk expression\(^{13}\). So a version of a Folklore genre is supposed to be a repetitive structure; and repetition renders the latent structure of a folk genre apparent. Thus, a version of folktale or ballad or myth comes to represent a repetition of the latent structure of another version. To go further in our
theoretical explication, the mention of the name of Derrida is inevitable. His idea of mimesis is brought home by the juxtaposed presentation of the texts of Plato and the French Poet Mallarme. When Socrates raises the question about a good painting, Plato says that a good painting by mimesis reproduces images already engraved in the soul. This, says Christopher Norris, leads to a position where we encounter a “notation of endless series of inscriptions, a perpetual doubling of text upon text, such that the original act of mimesis will always be lost beyond recall”14. This observation makes a good theoretical beginning for initiating a study on the problems of versions of a folk genre. In the earlier phase of folktale study, scholars labored hard to collect the different versions of a tale type or a proverb and tried to find out the place of origin. This led them to find out the oicotypes of a specific country. Attempts of this kind are made by scholars like Richard Dorson, Alan Dundes and Brenda Beck.

Brenda Beck tries to isolate specifically the Indian tale oicotypes15. When she made a full listing of tales of Aarne-Thompson index to arrive at an Indian oicotype, she was able to list the following as Indian oicotypes.

1. Sibling bond
2. Patron client bond
3. Threat of an adversary, and
4. Action motivated by the strength of individuals desire.

But a thorough study of the various versions of one Folktale (the tale of kind and unkind girls) collected worldwide, shows that stories having the sibling bond motif (step-daughter and real daughter or two sisters, younger and older, man and wife, two brothers etc., ) enjoy worldwide distribution. More such sibling bond motifs are found in other countries16. This makes the observation made by Brenda Beck that sibling bond is an Indian oicotype questionable. The idea of repetition as necessitated by different cultures, providing different versions of a folk genre, throws up new light. The untenable position of the historicogeographic method which encouraged the search for the earliest form of a particular folk tale, or the original archetype of a folktale is exposed.

In the Indian context, the idea of oppositional, clear cut difference of two identities (in the case of akam and puram for example) and the blurring of the oppositional characteristic (akam and puram as a temporally arranged oppositional continuity) now present clearly
the concept of repetition. (A version can be characterized as evolving from a kind of repetition). And this concept of repetition provides an adequate tool for accounting different versions as products of different cultures. Ramayana or Mahabharata versions with minor differences as found in different languages of India now ensure that these versions of the so-called Sanskrit original are really the other originals or repetitions. So a version actually represents a language culture in the Indian context.

What we have outlined methodologically so far is that not only the Indian or third world method of study is different from that of the West, but even its use of terminology and concept should be different. This post-colonial awareness is particularly crucial in the field of Folklore as Western money and methodology are freely made available in this branch of study. Before we conclude, we may touch upon another aspect of theoretical importance - the relationship between Indian Folklore and literature is not only oppositional but also continuous; they influence one another with equal impact. We may cite here the examples of the impact of reader-response researches on the performance studies of Richard Bowman and others. The continuing studies of Grimm's tales in Germany, will emphasize that Folk Narrative researches of Indian Literature Departments are not out of date.

The pair of *akam* and *puram* methodologically keep a sharp distinction as two opposing entities; but the terms *akam* and *puram* also emphasize that the opposing terms are in circular rotation and meet at another point. This kind of oppositionally fixed structures progressively changing towards an unfixed false oppositional structure lends an Indian theory of narrativity. The space lying middle way between *akam* and *puram* categories of oppositional as well as not so oppositional disposition is well amenable to further study. This is the difference between metaphysical understanding of the concept of the middle space and the theoretical understanding of such a middle space in between *akam* and *puram* opposition.
Notes

5. Carlos S. 1991 'Narrativity of poem and Fiction'
7. Ibid
10. Perumal A.N. 1983 'VellaikkaranKathai' For details and for a brief sketch of this ballad in English. International Institute of Tamil Studies, Madras.
12. Ibid
15. See the study of the variations of the type 480 of AT Warren E.Roberts. 1958. 'The Tale of the Kind and unkind Girls'. Berlin