The Structural Concept of Fairy Tales and Mass Culture in the Tamil Context

Prof. S. Carlos

The mass culture in the Tamil language media is not much studied and there are rarely any empirical research in this field. Still, with the advent of off-set printing presses, photo-composing facilities, populist political movements, radios, advertisements, cinemas and televisions, the character of Tamil culture is also undergoing a change. This may be noticed roughly from late sixties in Tamil Nadu.

The research in the field of mass culture is a recent phenomenon even in Western countries. From the beginning of the twentieth century, a few scholars – Oswald Spengler from Germany (in his 'Decline of the West' in the year 1918, Jose Ortega Y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher (in his “The Revolt of the Masses” in the year 1929), Arnold Toynbee, the English historian (in his multi-volume “A study of History” published between 1939 and 1961), Dwight Macdonald, the American editor, publisher and critic (in his essay “A Memory of Mass Culture” in the year 1953)\(^1\) - have attempted to identify what is “mass culture” and define a set of terms that have subsequently been used in the discussions and researches.

Macdonald differentiates “Mass Culture” from “High Culture” and “Folk Culture”. By high culture, he means James Joyce in literature and Piccasso in art; and by folk culture, he means the cultural products of rural people’s collective consciousness. Macdonald defines “mass culture” as the technologically concocted culture of the business world. He sets forth a number of prepositions summarizing what “Mass Culture” has done in United States and suggesting what it may do in other cultures too. Let me give the following Macdonald’s prepositions as quoted by Joseph W. Elder \(^2\).

1. “Mass Culture” destroys “High Culture” because the cultural elites disappear in the mass culture situation. “High Culture” must compete for survival in the public market place. And in the public market place, “Mass Culture” has all advantages. It is more easily understood and enjoyed by the consumers; its products heavily outnumber “High Culture's” products, and it can consistently undersell “High Culture”.

\(^1\) For more information, please refer to the original source or other scholarly works on the topic.

\(^2\) For more information, please refer to the original source or other scholarly works on the topic.
2. Where “Mass Culture” does not destroy “High Culture”, it corrupts it. “Mass Culture” is quick to seize anything new, standardize it, and mass produce it. The end product is a homogenization of “High” and “Mass Cultures”. Macdonald notes: “There is slowly emerging tepid; flaccid middle brow culture that threatens to engulf everything in its spreading ooze. There is nothing vulgar than sophisticated “Kitsch”.

3. “Mass Culture” destroys “Folk Art”. Aiming at majority tastes, Mass Culture either bypass unique traditions and cultural idioms or it blends them into a homogeneous totality. According to Macdonald “...the folk artist today lacks the cultural roots and intellectual toughness... to resist for long to pressures of Mass Culture. His taste can easily be corrupted, his sense of his own special talent and limitation (can easily be) obscured...”. The chance for a folk artist to modify his product and attain “Mass Culture” stardom will prove too much for most, if not all, of the folk artists...

Another important characteristic feature of Mass Culture is that, “it makes people more and more comfortable with their life while robbing them of their freedom to oppose what is in reality an evil social system...”\(^3\).

Macdonald’s idea of Mass Culture or the radical criticism of Herbert Marcuse, perhaps, are unknown to Tamil littérateurs, who very often air their criticisms against the growing commercialization of Tamil writing and arts. And there are little theoretical studies which throw light on the various aspects of Mass Culture in the Tamil situation. Still there is condemnation and attacks on various trends of the technologically produced Tamil Culture.

A few of the quotations culled from different sources of little magazines will prove that commercialism and mass produced cultural trends have found a place in the Tamil milieu too.

Sundaram Ramaswamy, a novelist, poet and critic of little magazine sections, vehemently attacks the spread of commercial culture in today’s Tamil writing, Tamil Cinema, Tamil drama and life of the Tamils.

“Our culture is being threatened by the profit oriented culture of the market place. Politics, journalism, cinema, religion etc., are corrupted by these businessmen in the garb of culture creators.
We do have standard modern works of artistic writings. But the villains who impede the process of taking those works to vast groups of people are the big magazines. Although our poets write modern verse of high quality, these big magazines are quick to seize them and mass produce them and in the process vulgarizes them. While we see high quality cinemas are produced in other Indian languages, Tamil Commercial world produces low productions...

One may compare Macdonald's description of Mass Culture as a "debased trivial culture" with that of Sundara Ramaswamy's observation of today's commercially motivated Tamil Culture as "absurd culture".

Another quotation from a book which intends to make survey of Tamil culture in the seventies is note worthy.

"...Magazines lure the readers by providing them material for easy reading. This is the origin of Mass Culture in Tamil. The contents of Mass Culture is to replace people's culture. This molds the people into consumers...

Another point made in this book may be compared to the views expressed by Horbert Marcure. "...Researches in the field of Tamil Mass Culture will show how the Tamil reading public has become a mass public and how they have become passive to the mis deeds of those who rule us..."

These are some of the observations made by the Tamil Littérateurs and culture critics. Here the criticism carries parallel ideas and suggestions to cultural critics of the west. But I believe that Mass Culture of the Tamils is yet to be studied systematically by social scientists of Universities and Research organizations of Tamil Nadu.

Drawing on a comparison of the propositions of the western cultural critics with those of the Tamil littérateurs, we summarize the following concepts:

1. The Western Mass Culture concepts, particularly those of Macdonald may be applied
to the study of Tamil Mass Culture, particularly in the field of periodicals, Tamil cinema and advertisements.

2. But only a detailed study of Macdonald's theory with its ramifications will ensure whether his theory needs modifications to study the various aspects of the differences between High Culture and Mass Culture.

3. The relationship of Mass Culture with that of Folk culture is an area, which is not touched upon by the Tamil Mass Culture critics, whereas Macdonald's theory emphatically examines its relationship.

4. Since there are not much discussions as to know the relation between Mass Culture and Folk Culture, we are not in a position to pass judgment whether the influence of Mass Culture and Folk Culture is detrimental to Folk Culture.

Here, what we have to carefully understand, is that most of the Tamil Culture critics arrive at their conclusion mainly from their understanding of what happens to literature in Mass Culture. But they have not cared to take into considerations of other expressions of Mass Culture like T.V. Images, Radio programs and other items like advertisements.

The relation between Mass Culture and Folk culture is a vast tree of study. My aim here is to examine whether the theoretical contribution made by Vladimir Propp through his *Morphological study of fairy tales* can provide a conceptual basis to carry out a study of folk elements in Mass Culture.

II

The theoretical contribution made by Propp in the study of fairy tales is now acknowledged throughout the world. In spite of his spirited criticism against the method of Propp, Levi Strauss, the universally reputed anthropologist of structuralist school, pays much encomium to Propp in the post script of the same essay. To Strauss the work of Propp was "a great discovery which preceded by a quarter of century all the attempts made by others …."
Propp's theory gave impetus to further research in the field of fairy tales and scholars like Alan Dundes, Heda Jason, Claude Bremond to name a few, followed Propp. They have developed their own understanding of Propp. And this enables them to modify the Proppian theoretical concepts so as to apply them in the fields of their respective studies. Roland Barthes, a semiologist and critic makes his own use of Propp in his method of structural analysis of Narratives. His method is a blend of the understanding of Linguistics and morphological researches of narratives.

In this background, let us consider a study of Tamil Mass Cultural traits present in illustrations, stories, jokes, cinema review and editorial writing in Tamil. The magazine selected for this study is 'Kumudam', a weekly. A random sample of a few issues are selected for this survey.

Kumudam, one of the largest circulated weeklies of India and enjoys a readership of all classes of tamils. The Tamil magazine, aiming to reach out to lakhs of Urban readers of various cultural backgrounds reveal that there are some underlying fairy tale structures in the various expressions of the magazines.

Recent studies in narratives show that there are narrative structures even in advertisements that appear in the newspaper and periodicals. Let me quote Gill Davies here: "...using the word (narrative) in a broad sense, even a single object, a painting, a photograph, an advertisement can be said to narrate....". The concept of narrative is formulated both by Propp and Levi Strauss. Propp's concept depends both on temporal and atemporal arrangements of narrative units called functions. Levi-Strauss calls Propp a formalist and says his functions are arranged only on the temporal axis of the fairy tale. But Levi Strauss essays that his theory shows that the narrative units (motifemes) are arranged in an atemporal matrix. Through my study of these two theorists of narratives, I came to the conclusion that Propp's study of fairy tales has been carried on two levels simultaneously, one
on the temporal level and another on the atemporal level. If this be so, the concepts derived from a study of fairy tale (Propp's theory) alone are capable of providing a frame work with which we can study the underlying fairy tale structures in the mass productions of Tamil media.

Now, perhaps, the point which we have to explain is what fairy tale structures are and how they present themselves in the deeper structural levels of a weekly magazine's various forms of writing.

A fairy tale, says Propp, needs a few of the thirty one functions he speaks of in his theory. Suppose a hero starts off to a distant place in pursuit of a magical ring, he either meets a helper or a villain. If he meets a villain, he will have to face difficulties, struggling with the villain and comes out victorious, getting the magic ring. If the narration still continues, then a false hero appears with his claims and the hero comes out victorious in the end.

Here, the functions like "the hero leaving home", "the hero meeting the donor of the magical ring" etc., are noted by Propp. These sequences are arranged in time (temporality). But there is the concept of the 'double morphological meaning' of function in Propp. Determining the function either by the preceding function of a tale or by the succeeding function of the tale is the concept of double morphological function. Levi-Strauss usually makes use of Linguistic categories to define Anthropological concepts and we will follow his methods here. Propp's "functions" may be compared to a word or a sign. Here, the signifier and signified of Propp's sign i.e., the function is determined in its relationship to a supplementary signifying system located at another level. (i.e., fixing the meaning according to whether it precedes or succeeds another function). Here the underlying level is operating in the unconscious system. If we find that a meaningful system is operating in an unconscious level, it is usually treated as a structural concept and not as a formalist concept. And since it is operating in the unconscious level, it is in the atemporal matrix.

What I try to say here is that Propp not only analyzed fairy tales in a temporal sequential level, but also in an unconscious timeless level, may be termed Proppian Fairy Tale concept.
With this background, we may venture into analyzing a few of Jayaraj's illustrations that appear in Kumudam weekly magazine. As we have seen, a photograph also can be said to narrate and we will try to show that Jayaraj's illustrations also narrate at different levels. The concept of reading created by Propps when he studied fairy tales is a concept of signs. So, a fairy tale can be now defined as a narrative system of signs, after the famous definition of Ferdinand De Sassure as language being a system of signs.

According to Ferdinand De Sassure, every sign has two planes: 1) the signifier and 2) the signified. The signifier in Jayaraj's illustrations are the images (a man, a woman etc.) that the drawing produces (signifier represents usually sounds, objects and images according to Roland Barthes), while the signified of those illustrations is the character that is represented. (I.e Ganesh or whoever comes in the novel)

Here, Sassure's concepts of sign may be compared with Tolkappiyar's concept of meaning. Tholkappiar says that a word operates on two planes. It expresses itself (sonmai) and it expresses something else (porumai). The word denoting itself may be compared, with the concept, signifier and the word denoting something else with signified.

The distinction between the signifier and signified is very minute and they stand united always. Yet this distinction is very important and the importance of this distinction is brought out to the attention of the scholars only by structuralists.

Now again we come back to the study of Jayaraj's illustrations. A journalist lists some of the qualities of Jayaraj's portrayal of female figures. They have longer limbs, slim hips and compact breasts. There is a particular pattern in Jayaraj's drawings of female faces. The journalist quotes Jayaraj saying that his creations are doll-like. It also says that a recent Jayaraj's illustration of a 'young mother and child' explains that the woman looks anything but maternal in a diaphanous sari that revealed a fair amount of cleavage and thigh. This same magazine charges Jayaraj being stronger in drawing women rather than men.

Now the question is, what is the signifier or “Sonmai” of the Jayaraj's illustration. The illustration has two levels. One depicts the women with straight locks, longer limbs, slim hips and hands and compact breasts. The other depicts the female figures like dolls, with their
diaphanous sari and cleavage and thigh. We will call the first plane, signifier I and the other plane, signifier II.

The signified or “porumai” of the picture is the particular character like Vasanth or Ganesh (Sujatha's serial) or Jothi or Mohan of Radhika's serial that appeared in Kumudam.

The unsuitability of the sexually provocative illustration to the serial which it purports to illustrate and the sexual details of the woman and her doll-like face show that there is a third meaning in these illustrations. The first meaning is produced at the level of signifier I, the second meaning at the level of signified and the third meaning is produced by the fusion of signifier I and II with the signified.

The female reader who doesn’t read the serial enjoys the new style of the illustrations (meaning-I). Any reader of the serial, whether man or woman, of course, affirms through these illustrations what they read through letters and words (meaning – II). The male libidinous reader additionally gets a dose of drawings of sexy, doll-like women (Meaning-III).

Jayaraj says that when he drew life-like sketches of women, he was criticized by male readers that they no more want realistic (woman of next door) pictures. This criticism is understandable in the light that the readers want this illustration as an outlet for their search for an alternate sexual figure.

Here, the reader unconsciously fuses the signifier which is the product of the artist with the signified (the product of the novelist) and the reader is instrumental in creating one of the signs of the Mass Culture.

This may be represented in a diagram thus.

```
Sign    Signifier – I  `{ Artist
(Reader)  Signifier – II
               Signified  `{ Novelist
```
So, the relation between the reader, the artist and the novelist produce the three levels of meanings, as seen above.

The first and second meanings are produced at the signifier and the signified levels respectively. But the third meaning is produced at a deeper level where a part of the signifier and the signified play their roles.

This gains significance because it is the cultural meaning of the illustrations of Jayaraj. Thus Jayaraj's illustration becomes a sign of Tamil Mass Culture.

The relation, the signifier establishes with the signified is a diachronic relationship i.e., a vertical relationship and the relation the sign establishes with its two phases (i.e., the signifier and the signified) is synchronic or horizontal relationship. The vertical and horizontal relationships are two styles of narrations.

The method of study we followed above may be extended to a study of a group of jokes that appear in Kumudam

The jokes selected for this study share some common qualities. They are patterned similarly. An example of such a joke goes like this:

“Oh Rangaswamy! you are not supposed to go out and buy anything for anyone at office hours”

“No Sir, the manager only asked me to get him some dosas”.

“That case, Rangaswamy, please rush up and hand over the dosas without delay”.

(Kumudam 1.10.87)

This pattern of jokes are mainly conversational, usually the person who starts the conversation ends the conversation after the second person puts a question or makes a statement. This question or statement, sometimes, brings out the curious aspect of the first person's statement. If the first statement does not evoke any interest, the second person's
intervention plays the role of provoking the curiosity. The last part of the conversation ends fittingly by giving a twist or punch or an unusual answer to the curiosity raised by the first statement. These are the three units of these types of jokes: 1) The initial statement; 2) The interfering statement and 3) The final twist. Any number of such jokes with these units can be found in the magazine, Kumudam.

The fundamental fairy tale structures are compared to Linguistic concepts, thanks to the studies of Levi-Strauss. The concepts like 'langua' (language) and parole (speech) may be roughly explained as 'store house of language' and 'expressed language'. The function of the language store house is to supply according to the linguistic needs of the speaker.

The linguistic store house's supply follows the vertical operation of language system (diachronic) and the 'expressed language' succeed one unit of the language after another unit i. e., the 'parole' functions in time and like the pattern of words continuing in a sentence (synchronic).

Here in analyzing the jokes, we may endeavor to find out the 'langua' of the joke. In the joke mentioned above, the first statement can be compared to a 'word' of language. The word occurred here is chosen from so many words. It is chosen with an aim to bring the desired effect at the final statement. This selected word puts up an ambiguous situation. The statement 'Rangaswamy, don't go out during office hours' evokes two possible meanings: 1) Rangaswamy, you go out during other times. 2) Rangaswamy, you go out if your higher officers ask you to go out during office hours. After reading the full text of the joke, the second possible meaning is found to be correct. Now we can conclusively say that there is a conscious selection of words in the first statement of the joke. This explains that the first statement is functioning like a word that selectively comes up and occupies the appropriate place in the spoken chain.

My attempt here is to delineate an underlying structure of operation which is vertical. (Let us see at the 'parole' of the joke). The conversational tone of this type of jokes establishes an inter personal relation. The first person addresses something to the second person and the second one's role plays an important role here. So it may be said that the jokes of these pattern serves the purpose of establishing interpersonal relation with one
another. The urban reader who is losing his interpersonal identity in today's society is assured solace physically. This is mainly the function of jokes of the type we have analyzed.

A study of the jokes of a particular form, as we have done here opens up possibilities to understand whether other journalistic writings can be studied using the same method.

A group of 'mini-stories' as it is called in Kumudam, suggest that they reveal a narrative strategy. Before going into the structure of the strategy, we will seen an example of this story.

In the story called “Malathi”, a father who is convinced of the character of a girl whom he is going to engage to his son, comes to the village of the girl, to ascertain her good qualities, meets a man. The young man, out of his good intentions praises the girl by explaining that the girl takes normal food, does not waste money on drinks etc.; she didn't talk unnecessarily to others during her school days, during the time she goes to draw water etc. The youth also says that since Malathi has a sixth finger on her foot, she is a lucky girl. At last the elderly person says to the youth that since the youth knows all her likes and dislikes and even about her sixth finger, he is not convinced about the character of the girl. (Kumudam 24.9.87)

Here also we will uncover three latent units of the narrative: 1) The father comes with a particular viewpoint. (The initial statement). 2) The youth meets him with a particular intention. (The interfering statement). 3) The father's earlier state of mind changes. (The final Twist).

Beneath the surface level of the narrative, we encounter the conversational structure of the jokes which we have seen above.

Hence the method of analysis meant for the jokes applied in the case of these narratives also.

Now we can come to the conclusion that though the 'mini-stories' are in the garb of narrative, they too reveal that their fundamental structure being the same as the structure of jokes.
This mini-story also reveals that the deeper structure of this narrative fulfills the wish for an interpersonal relation. Another structural formation that has gone into this mini-story's narrative strategy is its selective occurring of the initial statement and their final denouncement. An appropriate initial statement is unconsciously selected in this narration with a view to sustain the desired effect throughout till the final twist through logical and appropriate arrangement of the three units.

So, although the mini-story about which we are discussing here, does not share a common character or apparent structure with those jokes, they display similar morphological qualities.

Thus far I have shown that both the fairy tale structure, as well as the structure of the journalistic expressions such as illustrations, jokes and mini-stories may be said to reveal a vertical movement and a horizontal movement. By delineating these two categories of movements, we are able to prove that the Mass Culture expressions in the Tamil situation create new cultural signs.

Anyhow, continuing the study and debate in this direction will address the question of how far fairy tale structures go in establishing the inner structural levels of Tamil Mass Culture.
NOTES


2) Ibid P.13


5) Ilakku, Ezhupattukkalil Thamizh Ilakkiyam, Kaavya, Bangalore 1982. P.3

6) Ibid P.13


10) Tolkapiyam. III. 5.2
    “Perummai Therinda sonmai theridalam sollin aagum enmanar pulavar”.