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THE SPIRIT OF RATIONALISM AND REFORMISM IN SAMUEL VEDANAYAGAM  
PILLAI'S *PRATHAPA MUDALIAR CHARITHRAM*

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**Abstract**

The research article discusses about first Tamil novel Samuel Vedanayagam Pillai's *Prathapa Mudaliar Charithram*. It gives insights on various characters representing the people and the society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He criticizes the traditional society and encourages the modern thoughts. In the history of Tamil literature it marked the demarcation between the age of poetry and that of prose. The paper makes an attempt to discuss the social conditions in the Pre-independence India. It also focuses on the rationalist and reformist discourse of the period.

**Keywords:** society, 19<sup>th</sup> century, traditional society pre-independence, rationalist etc

Samuel Vedanayagam Pillai an English educated judge was a poet before he published his novel, *Prathapa Mudaliar Charithram* (1878), which is incidentally the first novel in Tamil. Samuel Vedanayagam Pillai by birth was a Roman Catholic. He was very much inspired by the

Western thought and culture. Though he had borrowed the literary form novel from the West, he had experimented it with a native theme. The spirit of Western renaissance is conspicuous in his novels. In fact, he himself announced the following in the preface to his work:

*I have represented the principles personages as perfectly virtuous, in accordance with opinion of the great English moralist Dr. Johnson*

Samual, 1987:105

The author of *Prathapa Mudaliar Charithram* on many occasions consciously or unconsciously expressed his views on certain political conditions in the country. When he began to write his novel the whole of India was under the control of the British rule. So occasionally he makes certain critical comments on British rule in general. As an individual he was familiar with the corrupt practices prevailing in the administration. As he worked as district

RESEARCH ARTICLE

munshi, he could understand the extent of corruption in the administration. In the novel he criticizes the selection process of officials in the British administration. Though stylistically, Samuel Vedanayagam Pillai 's novel *Prathapa Mudaliar Charithram* moves along the style of the nineteenth century prose writers, the author created his own peculiar technique and is considered a writer who strengthened the Tamil prose. His exposure to Tamil classics enriched his style. Though his style is argumentative at times, it remains rational most of the time. The proverbs and phrases he cites in his narratives not only enrich the grandeur of his prose but also enable to be considered a mile stone in the history of Tamil novel.

The novel follows the first person narrative as given by Prathapa Mudaliar, the protagonist of the novel. He begins the story from his childhood in a place called Sathyapuri in South India. Being the only son of Sundar Anne and Kanakachala Mudaliar and belonging to a wealthy family, in his eighth year a teacher is appointed to educate Prathapa at home itself. The childhood of Prathapa is filled with numerous unusual and strange incidents. Prathapa continues his education while his uncle daughter, an intelligent girl Ganambal attends the class along with him. Prathapa's mother Sunder Anne occasionally narrates fables to both Prathapa and Ganambal. The elders decide to get Prathapa and Ganambal married. However a dispute arises which

brings the marriage proposal to a halt. The family of Sambandam Mudaliar moves to a nearby town Panempalli in summer. While returning from the town back to their place Ganambal is kidnapped. On knowing of the news Prathapa reaches the spot and kills the kidnapper, thus saving Ganambal. He along with Ganambal then meets his uncle. Being impressed by Prathapa's behavior, Smbamda Mudaliar gives his daughter in marriage to him. Soon Ganambal becomes pregnant and Sambanda Mudaliar asks the son to be born to be given to him for adaptation.

However, Kanakachala Mudaliar rejects. Due to this there arise certain disputes between the two families and they decide that both Prathapa and Ganambal should not meet each other. Prathapa who is unable to convince his father leaves home and at the same time Ganambal also leaves her parents to join Prathapa. Without their knowledge they enter Adiyur, the home town of Kanakasabai, the friend of Prathapa. Kanakasabai is a very sensitive man. Though he is born in a royal family, because of the selfishness of his uncle he lands in the house of Santalinga Pillai, a poor teacher. He always has a desire to help others. He has a great sense of humor, good conversational skills and is courageous. When he learns that Santalingam Pillai is not his own, father he suffers a lot and years to know about his true parents. His happiness has no bounds when he comes to

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

know that the ruler of Adiyur Devaraja Pillai is his true father. Later, he marries Ganarathana and lives happily. The Adiyur Devaraju Pillai welcomes Prathapa and Ganambal. However, parents of both reach Adiyur in search of their children.

One day Prathapa goes hunting on an elephant. The troubled and disturbed elephant runs away throwing Prathapa in a far off place. The elephant then manages to return to Dhanasaka. Disturbed Ganambal poses a series of questions to the elephant which makes it take her to the place where it had thrown away Prathapa. Due to the prevailing anarchic conditions Ganambal, disguised as Prathapa becomes the king of the land. She rescues Prathapa who is sentenced to prison by exhibiting tremendous valor and courage.

The author portrays various characters and their traits in a convincing manner. Another important character in the novel is Prathapa's father Kanakachala Mudaliar. Though he is a wealthy man, he is soft spoken, patient and tolerant. His patience endures him to tolerate even his enemies. He never loses his temper even in matters of disputes. The author sketches another character Sambanda Mudaliar in contrast with Kanakachala Mudaliar. Sambanda Mudaliar is strange fellow who craves for money. Though he is a miser, his daughter Ganambal changes him. She influences him to help people by providing

monetary aid. Sambanda Mudaliar is portrayed as an arrogant man who seeks to adopt his daughter's son and this attitude of his disturbs the familial relations of his daughter.

Yet another important character in the novel is Devaraj Pillai. He is the father of Kanaka Sabai, friend of Prathapa and also the leader of Adiyur. He is a man of wisdom, who narrates several moral stories to Prathapa and Gnanambal during the times when they are separated from their families and brings transformation in them. He even takes care of his sister, a widow and her daughter. He leaves all his riches and goes in search of Prathapa who is lost in the forest while hunting.

To articulate his ideas against superstitions the author introduces a character by name Kanakananda Pillai, a teacher who teaches both Prathapa and Gnanambal. Being a tolerant person he forgives his daughter and son-in-law. It is he who suspends the superstitions in Prathapa. He takes Prathapa to the forest near Santapura and proves to him the non-existence of ghosts which he believed in. He even releases Prathapa from his obsession with astrology. He makes arrangements to educate children at his home.

The author has shown a great skill in delineating the character of Ganambal.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Ganambal is portrayed as an intelligent character in the novel, which rescues her husband and amends the evil nature of her father. She is presented as a responsible wife and daughter. She being a talented girl reads and interprets and interprets books from her childhood itself. She surpasses of all other classmates of her in studies. Even Prathapa and Kanaka Sabai fail to compete with her. She judges others well and at times corrects them by motivating them to change their attitude. In fact, Pratap, her husband learns many positive things from her. By merely conversing with others she can convert their minds. She stands as an incarnation of Indian woman and an example for self-respect. She hails from a wealthy family and she never uses harsh words even against the attendants of the family. When her father asks her to give her son in adoption to him, she rejects out rightly. Her father then questions as to whether she considers him, the father more important to her than her husband for which she replies that her mother felt that her husband was of utmost importance to her and similarly does she. Indirectly she lets him know that her husband in her priority. She is portrayed as a very bold character, which is seen in the incidents where she goes into the forest in search of her husband in the guise of a man for security reasons. She enters the kingdom where her husband Prathapa is imprisoned, a kingdom where anarchy prevailed. Dramatically she is chosen the King of the country and which

she is bound to accept. Her intelligence is exhibited when she proves her husband innocent and sees to it that he is released from prison. She disguises in her restores peace in the country and later, they both return home.

The author through the character of Ganambal exposes the fate of women in Indian society, her pain and suffering, her resistance to oppression of all forms. Dandayudhan comments on the character Ganambal as she is the “eve of fiction, the proto type of modern heroine in Tamil novel and literature.”

The novel deals with a period that beginning with British rule after the end of the Mugal rule in India which depicts certain historical and social conditions prevailing during the time. In the novel, the Tamilians worked as ‘Diwans’ under the Muslim rulers, so also the grandfather of Pratap, Ekambara Mudaliar, who earns a lot of property as a ‘Diwan’. Even the grandfather of Sambandha Mudaliar made a fortune by working as ‘Diwan’. The story of Kanaka Sabai in the novel proves that family disputes and betrayal for power was a common phenomenon in those days. During the rule of the East India Company when Dalhousie was the Governor General, the Doctrine of Lapse was imposed. According to this doctrine nobody could adopt a son and this is reflected in the novel. According to the tradition prevalent

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

in 'Palaipatta' the rulers who wished to marry their children had to seek prior permission from the collector. Due to this rule a problem arises when they wish to marry Kanaka Sabai.

The novel portrays the period in which the craze for English language started growing. People began to dislike their native tongues and started conversing in English to prove that they are cultured and modern. Those who learnt English language looked down upon Tamil scholars. Foreign culture had radically started altering the native culture and people began embracing atheism. Moreover, the English educated people were thinking that they had all knowledge with them.

The novel even focuses on the marriage systems of those times. The awareness among women is also portrayed in the novel. The girls were allowed to receive education in schools because of which they acquired knowledge and exhibited courage in life. The character of Sundaranne tries to create awareness among women with a regard to their rights. Sundaranne leads a team of women to Chennapatnam and complains against the collector of Vedapur to the Governor. The Governor very much inspired by the intellectual caliber of Sundaranne orders his people to get her portrait painted. In spite of the prominence given to women in public space the incidents of Sati prevailed

now and then indicating the terrible fate of women during that time.

Electricity and postal services were made accessible people. Courts were also established. As English became the official language, people were eager to learn the foreign tongue to secure jobs. The government employees in the lower cadre were humiliated by the white officers. People were still dependent on bullock carts for conveyance. Corruption was the order of the day in administration. Merchants and goldsmiths started cheating the people. The temple trustees were themselves involved in the thefts related to gold ornaments in the temples. The author reflects all these issues tactfully and skillfully in the novel.

In addition to the main plot of the novel, the author introduces various sub-plots to make the narrative interesting. The episodes or the stories he narrates are in a way 'historic', but they are linked to the main story without disturbing the aesthetics of the narrative. As it is observed by Dandayudham, 'during the time of the novel there was a lot of demand for stories which could be used for various purposes. To meet this popular demand and to cater to his own demand to interact, the author introduced various stories.' He makes them known to the readers through major and minor characters.

Even before the consolidation of legal system in India Vedanayagam Pillai

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

emphasized on the need to preserve legal records through the novel. He thought that they will be useful for the future judgments to be given in courts. He statistically comments on the judges who pass judgment not basing on evidences but depending on imagination and being biased. He criticizes judges who declare someone as criminal by looking at their faces. The novel presents the then rule by emperors, their worship which, the author propagates. In this context, it is to be noted that the author, in a way fails to appear to be an admirer of democracy. The author accepted the existing system, and this is made clear by K. Chellappan who opined as on one side Vedanayagam Pillai accepts the status-quo, while on the other, he stands for western values.

But on the whole, Vedanayagam Pillai accepts the status- quo includes the western values and in him, there is a consciousness of the other word in the activities of the word. The novel abounds in references to both English and Tamil texts.

Chellappan, 2001: 52

He exposes the injustice done by the advocates, in advocating the right ways that legal experts had to move on. He condemns the use of English language in courts. According to him, it is absurd to continue

arguments in English language in a context where everyone is Tamilian and not familiar with English. Another opinion expressed by Dr Dandayudham exposes the paradoxical thinking of the personality of Vedayayudhram. Dandayudham says:

He prepared self – government but a king. In this form of government the language of the people will be the language of the government. And it seems that he was the first to suggest this concept of self-government in those days. The plea for self-government was moved by the congress only after Dadabai Nowroji in the year 1906. in that congress session he explained clearly that there would be prosperity only when there is self- government and not in a slave country. It is indeed a gratifying to come across this idea of self- government in *Prathapa Mudaliar Charithram*

Dandayutham.1977 :45

As stated in the introduction to the novel, Vedanayagam Pillai presented the principle character in his novel as perfectly virtuous in accordance with the opinion of

RESEARCH ARTICLE

the great English moralist, Johnson, as it is observed already that Vedanayagam Pillai was an intellectual of the highest caliber. He abstained from preaching what he did not practice. He was a multi-faceted personality whose command over the subjects ranged from literature to philosophy. His contribution to Tamil literature is unique. He adopted a different dialect of Tamil in his novel and distanced it from colloquialism as observed by S. Kandaswamy. His description of domestic quarrels the novel are based on keen observations. As a pioneering effort *Prathapa Mudaliar Charithram* is truly a remarkable novel and offers numerous insights. It marked the demarcation between the age of poetry and that of prose.

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