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Interpretation of the Motif of *Kāmanōy* ('love-sickness') in the Context of Tamil *Kuṛavañci* Literature

Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to interpret the motif of *kāmanōy* ('love-sickness') in the context of Tamil *kuṛavañci* literature. The paper begins with general remarks concerning terminology, which is followed by the section introducing the subject of the analysis. A brief presentation of the theme of *kāmanōy* as depicted in the earliest Tamil literature, i.e. *caṅkam* poetry (ca. 1st-3rd centuries A.D.) serves this purpose. The essential part of the analysis is focused on the literary genre known as *kuṛavañci*, which represents the relatively late stratum of Tamil literature (approximately 17th-19th centuries). The young heroine of the *kuṛavañci* on seeing the god or the king in procession is subject to a serious psychophysical disorder, which is described in terms of a sickness manifesting a set of specific symptoms (here: *kāmanōy*). The motif is analysed basically with reference to the Tamil concept of feminine inner energy, which has been identified as *aṇaṅku* in the ancient Tamil sources. Another tool that is utilised for interpretation of the texts is the category of liminality as formulated by V. Turner. The analysis leads to the conclusion that *kāmanōy* can be interpreted as a poetic vision of the manifestation of the feminine inner energy at the moment of attaining puberty by the young heroine. It is further stated that the motif serves as a symbol of her liminal state and status.

Throughout Tamil literature we encounter innumerable descriptions of a young woman suffering the pangs of love. One of the finest expressions of this interesting motif is found in the *kuṛavañcis*, a category of texts that flourished in the Tamil poetry of the later period. The condition of the enamoured heroine is defined by various terms, one of them being *kāmanōy*. It must be explained that in the context of the *kuṛavañci* corpus *kāmanōy* is not the term preferably employed to describe the heroine's physical and mental state. As a matter of fact it hardly occurs there in this precise form. There are, however, premises that justify its usage with reference to the analysed motif. In general understanding, *kāmanōy* is a convenient, conventional term denoting a particular concept, the features of which are well defined. Yet the most important reason for selecting the

term *kāmanōy* in the course of the present analysis is the fact that it is deeply-rooted both in Tamil tradition and in the tradition of Tamil scholarship.¹

Kāmanōy ‘love-sickness’ (TL, v. II: 871) is a compound of two nominal bases, the foregoing base semantically qualifying the subsequent one. The first element of the compound is an adjectival form of *kāmam*, a Tamilised version of the Sanskrit *kāma* meaning ‘desire, happiness in love, sexual pleasure, object of desire’ (TL, v. II: 872). *Nōy* is a noun form derived from the Tamil root *nō* ‘to feel pain, ache, suffer, be grieved, distressed in mind, be injured, spoiled’ (DED 3143: 256).

The term *kāmanōy* appears in the earliest stratum of Tamil literature, i.e. *caṅkam* poetry (ca. 1st-3rd centuries A.D.) (e.g. *Kuṟuntokai* 5, *Akanāṇūru* 52, *Kalittokai* 99, 138). In the context of *akam* poems it generally refers to the emotional experiences of the young heroes caused by their passionate love. Interestingly, this feeling of love-desire is described in terms of an illness that manifests certain symptoms of psychophysical disorder. Although the suffering of *kāmanōy* is shared by both the hero (eg. KT 58, 136) and the heroine, it is the emotional condition of the young woman that is particularly dealt with by the poets. The diagnostic symptoms of the heroine’s *kāmanōy* consist of subtle changes in her physique, in her mental state, and in her behavioural patterns (Zvelebil 1986: 18-19). The most striking changes in the physical appearance of the heroine are the pallor (*pacappu*, *pacalai*), a sickly yellow-green paleness, frequently quoted as contrasting with her beautiful dark complexion, and loss of weight, which is expressed by images of bangles slipping off her wrists.² A short passage from KT 371 illustrates the above:

My body is growing pale;
my bangles are slipping off
I will have neither very soon
but my love is so great for that man (...).

(Shanmugam Pillai, Ludden (trans.) 1976: 137)

Besides physical changes the illness manifests certain symptoms of psychological or mental disorder – forgetfulness and distractedness, languor and bewilderment, bad temper and insomnia (Zvelebil 1986: 9).

The above-mentioned motifs and images could well be considered as a conventional stock of themes in love poetry, with particular reference to the situation of “love in separation” – pining, longing for the beloved. There is, however, a group of poems that introduces a further development in the *kāmanōy* theme. The significance of the specific treatment of the *kāmanōy* situation lies in changing the perspective of its presentation, i.e.

¹ K. Zvelebil employs the term *kāmanōy* to define a particular theme in the *caṅkam* poetry as well as its later developments (Zvelebil 1986).

² Another interesting symptom of the disease, although not frequently mentioned, is sweating (Dubianski 1979: 102).

moving it from a psychological background to a complex ritualistic context. The changed condition of the girl is noticed by her relatives – mother, step-mother, etc., who are worried that the symptoms are caused by disease or some other external agent. In this respect possession caused either by a mountain spirit or a demon, or by the *aṇaṅku* of the god *Murukaṇ* is frequently suspected (Zvelebil 1986: 38-39). Subsequently, arrangements are made for a therapeutic ritual, which is conducted by two different categories of performers. As a rule, first the female diviners are invited to perform a ritual called *kaṭṭu* ('binding') and diagnose the girl's illness. Although the disease, as mentioned above, could have originated from various sources, in the actual poems, however, it is almost a rule that the case of possession by *Murukaṇ* is proclaimed (Zvelebil 1986: 39). After the diagnosis is determined, the male shaman of *Murukaṇ* (*vēlaṇ*) is called upon to perform the exorcism, i.e. the ritual to propitiate the god and set the girl free. The *kāmanōy* is thus associated with possession caused by the god *Murukaṇ* and placed in a ritual context.

The motif of *kāmanōy* is further elaborated in the Tamil poetry of the later period and finds its explicit expression in *kuṛavañci* literature.³ *Kuṛavañci* is one of the several literary forms or genres known as *pirapantam* 'composition / literary work' or *cirrilakkiyam* 'a small or minor literary composition / genre'. As a part of the classical canon *kuṛavañcis* came into prominence in Tamil literature around the end of the 17th century A.D. and became highly productive throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (Zvelebil 1974, Mōkaṇ 1985, Muilwijk 1992, Cauntarapāṇṭiyaṇ 2000).⁴ They form a complex and refined genre with a story woven around the figure of a female fortune-teller caled *kuṛatti* or *kuṛavañci*, hence the name of the genre. As a literary entity a typical *kuṛavañci* poem is clearly divided into two parts with different settings and characters. The present paper refers only to the first part of the *kuṛavañci*, in which the motif of *kāmanōy* is introduced and elaborated.

The heroine of the poem, a young woman of the royal city or palace, is playing with her companions or attendants.⁵ At the same time the king, god, or local lord is passing the streets of the city in procession. She witnesses the parading hero and the very sight of him causes violent sensations and reactions in the young woman. She loses control over her body – her arms and legs become motionless (*kai kāl acaivīlantu*), her eyes stop blinking (*kaṇṇimaippatum maṛantāl*). She falls to the ground unconscious as if she were breathless (*mayāṅki matiyīlantu mūccilāl eṇa vīluntāl*). The clothes fall off her waist (*āṭai iṭai nekīla*) and bracelets slip off her hands (*anivaḷai karam nekīla*) (KTK: 13). A pallor spreads over the heroine's body (*uṭalum pacantiṭṭēṇē*), her breasts become swollen (*mulaikaḷ vimmuvalu*) and so heavy that her waist can hardly bear them (*vaṭṭa mulaiyāl iṭai cōrntiṭṭatu*) (MK: 73-75). The overwhelming sensation the heroine experiences is fever (*kāyccal*), an excessive inner heat. The young woman complains that the fever

³ The same theme appears in the other genres of *pirapantam*, e.g. *kōvai*, *kātal*, *pavaṇikkātal*, *ulā*.

⁴ The list of *kuṛavañcis* comprises more than a hundred titles.

⁵ She usually has a name such as *Kāmavallī* 'creeper of love', *Mōkaṇavallī* 'creeper of passion', *Rājamōkiṇi* 'she who is passionate for the king'; her name already suggesting the strong emotions she is subjected to.

burns her body (*kāccal ippaṭi kāyutē*) and the breath that comes out of her mouth is like the flames of fire (*mūccum akkiṇik koḷuntu pōl muntutē*) (MK: 79).

The companions and maids of the heroine wonder what might be the cause of her strange condition. They suspect some kind of disease or external agent to be responsible for this imbalance – “is this a sickness” (*mōcamō*), or “malevolence of the lineage deity” (*kulateyva virōtamō*) (MK: 74-76), “is she possessed by a demon” (*pēyō [...] piṭittatu*) (KTK: 14), “is this madness” (*piccō*), or “magic” (*māyamō*) (TK: 34). They carry the still unconscious girl home and try to reduce the fever by applying substances that are believed to bring a soothing effect and cool down the excessive heat in her body. They sprinkle rose water on her face (*paṇṇīr eṭuttu [...] mukattil tāṇ teḷittu*), apply sacred ash on her body (*nīr eṭuttu mēṇi muḷutum tāṇ taṭavi*) (KTK: 13) and smear her breast with rich sandal paste (*taṇattil celum cantanattai nirappuvār*) (MK: 77). They fan her (*viciri acaittu*) (MK: 77). Finally, the companions succeed in bringing the heroine back to consciousness, but her state is far from being normal or balanced. She feels dizzy, giddy and can hardly stand it (*talaikku ērutē nāṇ cakittiṭuvēṇō*) (MK: 73). The physical changes in the heroine are accompanied by her unbalanced reactions – excitement, irritation, sleeplessness. The mental state of the young woman finds its dramatic expression in her monologue-complaint, in which she blames the god of love (*Maṇmatan*), the moonlight and the south wind for her suffering. In the heroine’s own words the rays of the moon are very hot and burn her body (NK: 39). The south wind (*tenṇal*), instead of cooling her body, makes it wither and dry up (VVK: 44). The otherwise sweet voice of a cuckoo irritates her ears. She can neither eat nor drink – milk with honey tastes bitter. She cannot sleep – a mattress covered with tender flowers hurts her like thorns (KTK: 16).

The changed condition of the heroine is referred to as *mayal*, *maiya*, *mayakkam*. All these terms are cognates originating from the root *maya* (DED 3852: 311), meaning ‘confusion, bewilderment, madness, mental delusion, sensual infatuation, infatuation of love, desire, lust, unconsciousness, coma’. They are used here to describe a state of serious physical and mental disorder. It should, however, be mentioned that the above terms appear to be directly connected with the concept of possession by a deity (Hardy 1983: 346-347). Another important word used in the context of the heroine’s sickness is *pittu* / *piccu* ‘bile, madness’ (DED 3407: 276).⁶

At the critical point of the heroine’s suffering, a female fortune-teller, *kuratti* or *kuravañci*, is brought onto the stage. By performing specific ritual acts the *kuratti* determines the cause of the girl’s sickness as *kāmam* or *maiya* or *ācai* (‘love, desire’). “This fever” – she announces – “is not just a fever, oh beautiful young girl; this is the fever of excessive love-desire, *ammē*” (*kāyccal itu kāyccal alla eḷil cinṇa peṇṇē; kāmamiku kāyccal ammē*) (KTK: 45). Finally, the *kuratti* predicts that the young woman will soon be united with her beloved.

The context of the *kuravañcis* clearly points to an external factor as the source of the heroine’s disease. The symptoms of disorder in the young woman have been caused by

⁶ It is worth mentioning that the word *pittu* means ‘bile’, one of the humoral substances. An excessive amount of it in the body causes heat.

contact with the hero, who is the embodiment of masculine potency and sacredness.⁷ If we now compare the story narrated in *kuravañci* with the above mentioned *akam* theme, we notice that in spite of evident differences they display striking similarities. As a matter of fact both the stories are constructed with the same structural pattern.

At this point it is necessary to present briefly the beliefs and ideas of the Tamils connected with feminine energy, which in the early Tamil texts is denoted by the word *aṇaṅku*.⁸

The notion of feminine energy was first articulated and emphasised by B. Beck, who argued that in a Dravidian family woman occupies a central position, being the source of life and prosperity for her kin (Beck 1969). The concept was developed in the mid-seventies by G. Hart, who traced it back to *caṅkam* poetry and connected it with the term *aṇaṅku* (Hart 1975). In Hart's understanding, *aṇaṅku* is an impersonal, supernatural power of ambivalent nature, inhering in some persons, places or things. For the ancient Tamils this force was potentially dangerous and malevolent. But if *aṇaṅku* was present in its proper place and kept under control, it would act benevolently and bring harmony into life (Hart 1975: 321). One of the most important aspects of G. Hart's theory is the idea of *aṇaṅku* being particularly associated with feminine inner energy (Hart 1987). The interpretation of *aṇaṅku* offered by G. Hart was widely discussed among the Tamilologists: some scholars criticised it, particularly V.S. Rajam (Rajam 1986), others, like A.M. Dubyanskiy, found several interesting points to be further studied and developed. A.M. Dubyanskiy argues that the interpretation of *aṇaṅku* as the inner energy of women which can acquire sacred dimensions is entirely justified in the context of *caṅkam* literature (Dubianski 1994: 57). A detailed analysis of the *caṅkam* poems leads him to the conclusion that one of the two basic meanings of *aṇaṅku* is 'inner energy' (Dubjanskij 1989: 25). He continues: "The possession of *aṇaṅku*, which is closely connected with sexuality and the power of fertility, represents an ultimately positive value, which is significant not only for a woman but primarily to her family, especially to the menfolk." (Dubianski 1994: 57). In accordance with B. Beck's views, Dubyanskiy emphasises the qualities of *aṇaṅku* as a natural power, its characteristic expression being heat and / or fire (Dubianski 1994: 58).

In order to produce the benevolent effect of *aṇaṅku*, this ambivalent power should be controlled, properly channelled and handled. Both external and internal means of control are required in this respect. The former is usually understood in terms of the male-female relationship. There are men who are considered to be the guardians of the energy accumulated in a woman. The principal role is played by her husband, whose

⁷ On the concept of the king as the embodiment of sacred power, cf. Hart (1975); on the king's relationship with his female subjects, cf. Shulman (1985).

⁸ The meaning of *aṇaṅku* as a verb is 'to suffer, be distressed, be slain; to afflict', and as a noun – 'pain, affliction, killing' (DED 56: 6). It should be noted, however, that in contemporary Tamil it is the pan-Indian Sanskrit word *śakti* (its Tamilised version is *cakti*) that functions as the term denoting feminine inner energy. Its usage can be explained as a result of the process of Sanskritisation. The Tamils have adopted the Sanskrit term *śakti* to define a concept that has its origin in the beliefs and ideas of their ancestors. It is thus justified to treat, both the terms *aṇaṅku* and *cakti* as functionally equivalent in the Tamil context.

control over *aṇaṅku* through sexual intercourse is most efficient. However, the main responsibility for keeping the energetic potential in a balanced, controlled state lies with the woman, its possessor. The proper attitude of a woman towards her energy (*aṇaṅku*) is denoted by the word *karpu* ‘virtue, chastity’, its primary meaning being ‘learning, education, training’ (from the root *kal* ‘to learn’). The term can thus be understood as the woman’s compliance with the prescribed system of rules, which is done by learning and self-discipline.

The potential of the feminine energy is connected with a particular stage in the life-cycle of a woman and with her status. It is different in the case of a virgin and in that of a married woman, a mother, whose fertility has been proven. As a power associated with fertility, with procreative powers, *aṇaṅku* manifests its potential in a woman at the moment of her attaining puberty. It is supposed to accumulate in the parts of the body that are marked with obvious sexual symbolism – breasts, thighs, hair. The most striking symptom of its manifestation is the internal heat that can be transformed into fire, if set free.

A young girl who has attained puberty is perceived as possessing a generative power of great potential. However, her awakened sexuality may lead to emotional imbalance which might cause danger to herself and her relatives. Many scholars have pointed out the ambivalence with which the advent of puberty is perceived. S. Caldwell’s observations concerning the contemporary Kerala are relevant in this connection: “menstruation while signaling the potential for fertility and birth, also implies a danger: the intense emotions of sexual desire believed to accompany physical maturity may lead the girl to disaster if they are not restrained and controlled until her marriage” (Caldwell 1998: 210). While presenting a typology of female status possibilities coordinated with the powers and the degree of auspiciousness each is supposed to possess, H. Reynolds characterises a virgin, an unmarried female (*kanni*) as a “capricious power, usually auspicious; homologised in life and after death to female divinities called *ammaṇ-s* (‘lady’)” (Reynolds 1991: 36). B. Beck speaks of the young girl’s “unconscious sexuality”, and S. Wadley adds “that sexuality must be made conscious and must be controlled, both by society and by the woman herself, in order for her powers to be linked to those of Lakṣmī, the goddess of prosperity” (Wadley 1991: 157).

Scholars have noted that in Tamil society the rituals accompanying the moment of attaining puberty are very important and celebrated with particular care (Diehl 1956, Shanti 1994).⁹ The most significant elements in these ceremonies are the symbolic cooling of and binding the girl’s energy, which is actually performed by pouring water on her, offering her particular items of food, putting on a silk sari for the first time, tying up her hair, etc. (Beck 1969; David 1991; Wadley 1991). The external control and responsibility for the girl in the post-puberty stage until her wedding lies with her father and brothers.

⁹ The puberty rituals are celebrated in a manner resembling a wedding; frequently both the ceremonies are combined and take place at the same time.

Let us now return to the *kuṛavañci* texts. In the context of the above discussion it appears to be entirely justified to interpret the heroine's sickness in terms of a crisis caused by her losing control over her own sexual energy. Contact with the male hero – the god or the king – becomes an impulse that makes the energy accumulated in the heroine explode violently. Unconscious of her sexuality, the young woman is not able to realize what is happening to her. She loses control over her own body and emotions. The poems provide an exact illustration of the idea that the sexual excitement is associated with the excessive heat in the body. Descriptions of the heroine's condition create a picture of a woman consumed by fever, overheated inside. *Kāyccal* 'fever' becomes the clue-word in this context.¹⁰ The seriousness of the situation is signified by the fact that ordinary, routine attempts to cool the body down bring no results. Even the natural phenomena usually associated with refreshing and pleasant coolness, like the moonlight or the southern breeze do not have a soothing effect on the heroine. On the contrary, they make the fever increase and the woman suffer more.

The heroine is a young unmarried woman. The *kuṛavañci* texts describing the explosion of energy in her body can thus be viewed as a poetic record of one of the periodic transformations she undergoes. Coming of age and menstruation are often associated with strong sexual desire, emotional imbalance and an accumulation of heat, which is believed to be highly dangerous.

The *kuṛavañcis* present a powerful poetic vision of the manifestation of feminine energy with all its implications. The incited power reveals its dangerous, destructive features. It takes the form of fever, an inner heat that consumes the heroine and everything that is around her – the tender leaves and sprouts she is lying on get burnt, the garland she is wearing fades, etc. The images of her bodice being torn apart by her swollen breasts, clothes that fall off her body, and the bracelets unconsciously slipping off her arms – all this can be viewed as a symbolic record of the process of the growth of the energy in the woman's body and of its breaking out of control.¹¹ Such a violent manifestation of feminine power makes the entire situation very dangerous for the girl and can lead to disaster. It is thus necessary to take extraordinary preventive measures in order to re-establish control over the power and place it within the limits of safety. These activities are symbolically expressed by the appearance of a *kuṛatti* and the ritual she performs. The words of the fortune-teller announcing the wedding of the heroine have a deep symbolic meaning. They imply the sexual intercourse that will serve to transform the powerful energy into a new life, the most desired state in a fertility-oriented society.

Further analysis of this fragment of the *kuṛavañcis* points to the distinct features of the state of liminality (Turner 1969), when the sacred powers are manifested in a very intensified manner. The poetical images are strung together to create a paradoxical vision.

¹⁰ From the root *kāy* 'to grow hot, to be heated'; it is worth mentioning that the same root as *verbum transitivum* means 'to bear fruit' (TL, II: 874-875).

¹¹ Clothes, and especially bracelets are the symbols of protection, of binding the body, keeping it under control. This is one of the reasons for the ritual called *vaḷai kappu* ('bangle protection'), i.e. the placing of many bangles on the wrists of pregnant women (Reynolds 1991: 48).

The symbolism of life and fertility, its embodiment being the young woman herself, intertwines with the symbolism of death, which is expressed by the withered, dried elements of nature – sprouts, leaves, flowers, which form a background on which she is portrayed. The condition of the heroine, who falls to the ground unconscious and stops breathing, is neither life nor death. The ambiguity of the situation creates an atmosphere of chaos and extreme danger.

The sequential images lead the reader to follow the transformation of the heroine. In the initial stage she is depicted as a carefree beautiful young girl, joyfully playing with her friends. However, the following part of the thematic sequence brings a radical change in the picture. The girl collapses breathless and becomes subject to violent physical and mental changes. This particular moment clearly marks the phase of separation, signifying the detachment of the heroine from her earlier state.¹² The psychophysical disorder she experiences is expressed primarily by *pacalai* spreading over her body and bangles slipping off her wrists. In Tamil tradition these symptoms are considered a loss of feminine beauty (Dubianski 1979: 91). The heroine of the *kuravañci* is thus symbolically deprived of her previous attributes. The motif of clothes falling off her body is yet another evident symbol of her liminal status (Turner 1969: 95-96).

The liminal state of the heroine is further emphasised by the presence of a *kuratti*, who diagnoses the sickness, or the cause of the crisis and determines the remedy, or the means to solve it. In other words she guides the heroine to pass through the difficult and dangerous liminal phase. The appearance of the *kuratti* in the above context clearly points to her role as a ritual specialist capable of dealing with *aṇaṅku*, i.e. controlling and placing the power within the proper limits by ritually ‘binding’ it (*kaṭṭu*). In the course of the ritual she makes the young woman conscious of her sexuality, which is an important, initial step in the process of the woman’s self-controlling of her energy (*karpu*). The predictions of the *kuratti* that the heroine will soon be married and united with her beloved mark the beginning of the phase of reaggregation. They define the new state and status of the heroine as a wife and mother. The final part of the sequence leaves no doubt that the transformation has been completed, as the behavioural pattern of the young woman stands in visible contrast with her previous state. Quiet and overwhelmed with happiness she generously rewards the fortune-teller for her predictions, which signifies her regaining of the balanced condition and willingly accepting her new social status.

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¹² The symptoms of the heroine’s disorder can also be viewed as the distinct symbols of the state of ritual death.

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