Abstract

The present study looks at the construction of the existing structure of the history of Tamil literature and its trajectory down the ages. It attempts to trace out the origin and the development of the linear chronological consciousness among Tamils. Although the written evidences argued that the first attempt for chronologically structuring the literary activities in Tamil had started with Robert Caldwell’s ‘A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages’ (1856), this study proposes an argument that the historical understanding firmly stems into the concept of ‘text’ and also the new ways of approaching literature that was initiated and further developed by the influence of the European textual practices in Tamil language. The European influences into Tamil languages is invariably associated to translation activities, particularly the translations from the European languages into Tamil. Further, the European’s textual practices and its material aspects have gradually influenced the literary activities in Tamil, and as a result the multiple practiced literary activities in Tamil had translated into the European structure. However, the very meaning of literature as it is understood presently is subtly related to the European modern thoughts. Therefore, this research argues that the modernity and the modernising the literary activities in Tamil had started with the European texts, principally through translations into Tamil language.

The translated texts from the European languages into Tamil adopted the structure that was quite new to Tamil literary practices over the ages. The name of the author, proper introduction, text without error, content description and the exact date of the text composed are all completely new to the multiple practiced literary activities in Tamil language. Further, these textual aspects are closely associated with the material nature of the text, the print medium. Therefore, the print and its influence in Tamil literary activities evidently translate the traditional literary practices into
modern meaning of text. However this new ways of understanding the textual practices, particularly the print brought multiple practiced literature in terms of religion, region and caste discrimination into a single term ‘Tamil literature’. Therefore, the central concern of this study is the notion of ‘Tamil literature’, the study in other words argues that the very understanding of ‘Tamil literature’ is a modern concept, principally constituted by the translations. In the pre-modern times, the literature in Tamil exist and practiced multiple ways, not as ‘Tamil literature’.

The modern concept of ‘Tamil literature’ creates a necessity to understand the new category into an order, and as a result, the attempts to write a linear chronology of Tamil literature had initiated. Although the content and structural aspect of the linear order resemble the modern notion of text and also the modern ways of literary practices, the history of Tamil literature subtly retained the traditional practices of the Vaithika religious supremacy and also justified it as a normalcy. This act of appropriating the Vaithika religious hegemony into the modern structure is justified by the various ways of employing the concept of translation. In other words, the literary historiography employed the concept of translation as a tool to retrieve the Vaithika religious hegemony into the modern structure as it was practiced in the traditional order. The main focus of the research is to discuss the ways in which the concept of translation had been subtly employed and by doing so how the Vaithika supremacy in Tamil literary history was justified as normalcy.

The central enquiry of this study is discussed in the following five chapters. The first chapter, Introduction introduces the scope, nature, significance and structural design of the study. It locates the concept of translation and its relation to both the multiple ways of traditional literary activities and the modern literary practices introduced and developed by the European textual influences. Further, it accounts the existing study related to the research. The focused research on Tamil literary historiography and the western influences on Tamil literary activities are very less
in number. However, this chapter discusses the existing literature in detail, by doing so, it attempts to explain the connection between the print, translation and the origin of linear historical consciousness among the Tamils. By discussing the existing literature in detail, this chapter explains the significance of this study and its importance.

The following chapter, “Religion, Tamil Literary Practices and Modernisation: The influence of the European Textual Practices on Tamil Literary Activities”, attempts to understand the nature and the functions of the multiple ways of practicing Tamil literature down the ages. Further, it also explains the trajectory constituted and developed by the European textual activities and its influence on Tamil literary practices. It principally argues by quoting two different events, the former belongs to 19th century whereas the latter is from the 20th century, that the interaction between the traditionally practiced activities and the modern. Adding to this, this chapter also explores the print and the prose form and their influences in Tamil literary activities. At last, it discusses the role of formal education and its part in shaping modern understanding of the term ‘Tamil literature’.

The third chapter titled, “The Harbinger of Modernity: The Transaction between European and Tamil Textual Practices” argues how the European translations have subtly influenced the literary activities in Tamil and gradually became the model for Tamil literature. It explores the economy of transaction between the traditionally practiced literary activities and the European initiations in defining the concepts such as ‘Tamil’, ‘literature’ and ‘literary history’. Further, it has been explained in detail that the influence of the print as a new material. It attempts to argue that the introduction of the formal education to the common mass, the initiations of the translations of scientific treatise and the prose form as the centre of literary activities are some of the central transformations which translate the age old religion-centric literary activities of Tamil into the
modern understanding of Tamil literature. It further discusses the origin and development of modern thoughts into Tamil literary sphere. Starting from the translation of the Portuguese Christian prayer books during the 16th century to modern scientific treatise of late 19th century, the European translation activities are at forefront to define and structure the modern sense of Tamil literature and the history of Tamil literature.

The fourth chapter titled, ‘The Politics of Employing the Concept of Translation in the Act of Constituting a Single Linear Chronological History of Tamil Literature’ studies the politics of employing the concept of translation in multiple ways, and as a result a particular tone for the history of Tamil literature is constituted. The central concern of this chapter is to study the ways through which the Vaithika religious hold over the literary activities in Tamil, which was the base for traditional order, has subtly been retained as it is in the modern structure. Along with this, this act of retaining the Vaithika religious supremacy is justified adopting the modern logical protocols. However, the entire act of logically justifying the appropriation of the Vaithika religious supremacy into the history of Tamil literature was made possible by employing the concept of translation in multiple ways. The act of literary historiography however, not only accounts the translated texts which is the product of translations but also employing the conceptual understanding of translation to meet out its preconceived needs. In short, this chapter travels around the multiple ways of employing the concept of translation, and by doing so how the particular meaning of Tamil literary past is constituted. Further it explores the covered intention behind the particular meaning.

The last chapter, ‘Conclusion’ condenses the discussion so far made. It narrates the connection between the beginning of modern thought into Tamil, the translations and their role in constituting the new ways of understanding ‘Tamil literature’ and the politics of imagining and
thus constituting a linear chronological history of Tamil literature. To be precise, the research argues the following points: 1) the European translation activities introduced the modern thoughts into Tamil, 2) by the influences of the modern thoughts, the traditionally practiced multiple canons of Tamil literary activities came under a single term called ‘Tamil literature’. 3) Therefore, the term ‘Tamil literature’ is a modern category initiated and developed by the influences of the European translations into Tamil. 4) The concept of translation has subtly been employed as a tool by the modern attempts of literary historiography to retain the traditionally followed Vaithika religious supremacy into the modern structure; for example, by labelling the other religious texts as ‘translations’, the Vaithika religious texts become the Tamils’ own., and so on. In short, the study establishes the various role of translation played while defining the meaning of Tamil literature and also the history of Tamil literature.