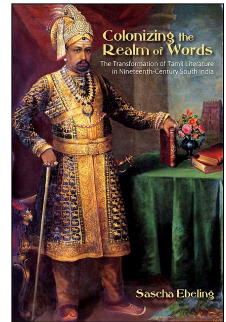


Colonizing the Realm of Words: The Transformation of Tamil Literature in Nineteenth-Century South India, by Sascha Ebeling

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Colonizing the Realm of Words is a major contribution to the study of Tamil literature. Rather than attempting an encyclopaedic account of Tamil literature in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Ebeling focuses on a few authors and works that epitomize significant trends and transformations in literary style and function of this period. The book is rich with detail of Tamil poetics, and the extensive trans-



lations, especially of verse, present much material to English-reading audiences for the first time.

In his introduction, Ebeling discusses the nexus of literature and colonialism, and the neglect of nineteenth-century Tamil literature by scholars. He views literature as a “contact zone,” borrowing a phrase from Mary Louise Pratt. This literary contact zone was the site of the transformation of literature in imperial contexts, a process that he calls the “colonization of literature” (5–6). Ebeling goes on to give a convincing account of the neglect of nineteenth-century Tamil literature. Recent Tamil and European literary historians have agreed with colonial and missionary critics of a century earlier in considering this a “dark period” of Tamil literature, one of decadence and decline, “vulgar,” “pedantic,” “imitative,” and “childish” (18–19). Ebeling highlights the cultural and ethical prejudices behind these characterizations, and his book is an attempt to demonstrate the value of this literature, not only for its aesthetic qualities, but also as an object of study that can add to our understanding of broader social and cultural changes.

The next two long chapters form the most impressive part of the book. These chapters detail “traditional systems of literary production” in Tamil, with attention to literary style, function, and patronage. Ebeling looks first at the biography and writings of T. Minakshisundaram Pillai, one of the preeminent Tamil poets of the second half of the nineteenth century and probably best known as the inspiring teacher of U. V. Swaminatha Iyer. Ebeling discusses the variety of poetic forms that Minakshisundaram Pillai and others of his time used, such as *yamaka*, *cilētai* (Sanskrit *śleṣa*), *tiripu*, and *cittirakkavi*. These tested the poet’s skill in structuring verses in complex patterns of alliteration, employing puns, and devising syntax with variable word breaks and meanings. Tamil and Western commentators came to criticize these poetic forms as emphasising dazzling skill with language, or form, over edifying content. Ebeling points to a general aesthetics of nineteenth-century Tamil literature: a “concern with ornamentation or ‘embellishment’” (53), and a focus on language in itself. Ebeling’s knowledgeable discussion of a number of forms and genres, his translation of verse, and his discussion of monastic patronage of poets and the “economy of praise” that drove elite literary production at the time, all make this valuable material for scholars of South Asian literature.

Chapter three shifts focus from religious to courtly patronage contexts. Besides an extensive survey of poets of a few Tamil royal courts (116–32), the chapter contains long translations that display the combination of eroticism

and praise in this courtly literature. Ebeling traces the language and tone of this poetry to the Nayakar courts, and theorizes that it functioned in the nineteenth century to celebrate former royal glory. Drawing from C. J. Baker, Ebeling sees these compositions as “acts of ‘ritualized remembrance’” which recall “former grandeur and lost splendor” (157). The chapter ends with a fine discussion of shifting roles and opportunities afforded traditional poets, who increasingly became Tamil teachers in schools and editors of palmleaf manuscripts for publication. The final decades of the nineteenth century saw the decline of elite traditional Tamil literary practices, a shift from literary worlds that found ideals in the Tamil past to those that increasingly looked to the West for inspiration.

The final chapters look in some depth at the emergence of Tamil prose writing and Tamil novels, focusing especially on the author Mayuram Veta-nayakam Pillai. The shift from verse to prose composition was, as Ebeling highlights, a momentous transformation in literary form. Additionally, elite Tamil writers, influenced by Western notions of the function of literature, began to use literature as a platform to advance social reform, not primarily as a showcase for their literary skills. The last chapter documents the rise of the Tamil novel, with attention to shifts in literary style and especially literary content, which became more didactic and less ornamental. In a final, short epilogue, Ebeling asserts that it is too early to draw general conclusions on “literature and/under colonialism” on the basis of the literary shifts in Tamil that he has so finely documented here (248). Instead, he hopes that he has made a persuasive case that nineteenth-century Tamil literature is worth further study.

I think Ebeling is being too modest here, because his book does more than just point to a valuable area of study—it is itself a significant contribution to Tamil literary studies. Through extensive translations and learned analysis, Ebeling presents the reader with unprecedented views of Tamil literature in this transformative period, situating these momentous shifts in their social and ethical contexts.

Ebeling’s use of “colonization” to describe these literary transformations seems heavy-handed, however. His concern is with Tamil poets and their compositions, and the spectre of “colonialism” appears only obliquely in Western moral sensibilities, literary genres and practices, and institutions such as schools. There is no sense of coercion of Tamil poets, who are free to choose what literary forms they compose. Indeed, Ebeling remarks on the remarkable freedom of the Tamil vernacular press in this period (169).

At times I was uncomfortable with the “modern” vs. “traditional” (sometimes also “pre-modern”) language and dichotomy that dominate the book’s periodization of literature. This language implies a teleology of literature, where modern Western literary practices inevitably replace traditional ones. The terms draw too rigid a dichotomy between two literary worlds. Did the traditional world of Minakshisundaram Pillai really exist in the pristine purity as presented here via Swaminatha Iyer’s biography of Pillai, or was this purity a nostalgic fantasy of the biographer? I suspect the latter, given that Pillai’s institutional base, the Tiruvavatuturai monastery, was also supporting the activities of Arumuga Navalar, who was pioneering Tamil prose writing and Tamil publishing. The book might have benefited from more attention to writings and material that blur the boundaries between “traditional” and “modern” literary worlds. For example, there would be some genres that would not have been as radically transformed over this period, such as temple myths (*talapurāṇam*).

These criticisms took away little of my appreciation of this meticulous piece of scholarship. Ebeling demonstrates a formidable knowledge of the texts, authors, and contexts of elite Tamil literary worlds of the second half of the nineteenth century. Also impressive is his comprehensive knowledge of relevant secondary scholarly literature in Tamil and in European languages. The book gives a wonderful, detailed picture of the biographies, writings and contexts of some of the most important authors in Tamil of the nineteenth century. It documents major transformations in patronage, Tamil literary style and function, and audience. It will be of interest to scholars of Tamil studies, Indian literary studies, and colonialism and literature.

Rick Weiss

Victoria University of Wellington