Sangam Landscapes and Thing Theory: A Study with Reference to *Kurunthogai*

M. John Britto
PG & Research Department of English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous)
Tiruchirappalli-620002, Tamil Nadu, India
Email: jbritto865@gmail.com

Abstract Sangam literature is a characteristic feature of Tamil literature. In the annals of Tamil Nadu, the Sangam Age is termed the golden period, and it is widely known for its five types of *thinais* (landscapes) namely Kurinji, Mullai, Marutham, Neithal and Paalai, each with its own flora and fauna, and other distinct traits that find a due place in the literary works. *Kurunthogai*, a Tamil literary classic, which is more than two thousand years old, forms a part of Sangam literature. This research paper seeks to trace a few aspects of thing theory in *Kurunthogai*. Introducing the classic with its historical context which specifically encompasses an account of the Sangam thinais and their poetic attributes, the paper examines the significance of things in the contemporary world, and presents a succinct portrayal of the focus of thing theory, followed by a short note on the key implication of the word "thing." Subsequently, it proceeds to analyse the aspects of thing theory in *Kurunthogai*, exploring how objects become things and how things form, transform and shape the human subjects. It also distinguishes between things and ideas, with an emphasis on the role and physicality of things in *Kurunthogai*. Finally, it explicates the concept of methodological fetishism, and highlights the need for looking *through* things.

Key words Thing theory; Tamil; Sangam thinais; *Kurunthogai*; methodological fetishism.

Author **M. John Britto** is Assistant Professor of English at St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India. He presently holds a Teacher Fellowship awarded by UGC. He is the author of the book, *Demystification of Franz Kafka's Works*, and co-author of the book, *Literary Criticism*. He has published several research papers in national and international journals. His current research focuses on thing theory.

Introduction

Tamil Nadu has a very glorious and ancient civilization which is evidenced by its "ancient structures, temples, chavadis (resting homes) and rock carvings" (Adhikari). According to historical records, and the study made by A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, "In Old Tamil Language, the term Tamilakam (Tamiḻakam , Purananuru 168. 18) referred to the whole of the ancient Tamil-speaking area, corresponding roughly to the area known as south India today, consisting of the territories of the present-day Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, parts of Andhra Pradesh, parts of Karnataka and northern Sri Lanka" ("Sangam Period"). Tamil language is believed to be one of the most ancient languages. Selig S. Harrison, in this regard, remarks that "the comparative age of Tamil and Sanskrit remains a subject of controversy" (40). Tamil, Harold F. Schiffman authentically records, is considered to be more ancient than even Sanskrit (177). It is the mother and the oldest of the South Indian languages. As Sanford B. Steever writes, "First attested about 254 BC, Old Tamil is the oldest recorded member of the Dravidian languages, a family which today encompasses twenty-four distinct languages. Old Tamil belongs to the southern branch of this family, which includes Malayalam, Irula, Kota, Toda, Kannada, Badaga, Kodagu, and Tulu, as well as Modern Tamil" (50). The Sangam Age finds the most significant place in the annals of Tamil Nadu, and it is also said to be the golden period of Tamil Nadu. On account of its central focus on the development of Tamil language and literature, it is also considered "the golden era of the Tamil language" ("Tamil Literature"). During the Sangam Age, the Tamil country was under the regime of the popular kings of the Chera, Chola and Pandya dynasties who maintained peace in the land ("Tamil Literature").

The Tamil literary classic, *Kurunthogai*, a collection of 400 poems, forms a part of *Ettuthogai* (eight anthologies), belonging to Sangam literature, which derived its name from the word *Sangam* of Tamil poets, who flourished during the age of the Pandya kings of Madurai. As recorded by Vijaya Ramaswamy, the Tamil word, *Sangam*, literally means a 'gathering' or an 'assembly'. It is said that three Sangams were held in the ancient period and that thousands of poets presented their compositions in the Sangams and debated over style, syntax and attainment of excellence in Tamil. The Sangam literature is divided into three phases: (i) the Mudal Sangam (the first Sangam), which is believed to have met about 10,000 BCE, and which is believed to have been convened by the sage Agasthya; (ii) Idai Sangam (the middle Sangam), which is said to have lasted 3,700 years. The Tamil classic, *Tholkapiyam*, is believed to be the only extant literature of this period; and

(iii) Kadai Sangam (the third Sangam), which is believed to have lasted 1,850 years. The entire Sangam literature belongs to the third or Kadai Sangam. It is believed that the literature of the first two Sangams was lost in the Great Flood that spread through ancient Thamilaham which is also known as Tamil Nadu (220-221). The main Sangam anthologies are: *Pathupattu*, *Ettuthogai*, and *Pathittrupattu*, and later-Sangam anthology *Padinenkizhkanakku*. *Ettuthogai* consists of the following eight anthologies: (i) *Narrinai*, (ii) *Kurunthogai*, (iii) *Aingurunuru*, (iv) *Paddirrupattu*, (v) *Paripadal*, (vi) *Kalithogai*, (vii) *Ahamnanuru*, and (viii) *Puramnanuru*.

Thing theory, a new critical theory, seeks to study the relationship between things and literature. It addresses two significant questions: what do the things mean, and how do the things mean? It was largely created by Bill Brown, a professor of English at the University of Chicago. The Tamil poetic anthology, *Kurunthogai*, serves as a prototypical record of 'things' of the five Sangam landscapes which play a significant role in forming, transforming and shaping the human beings of the Sangam age. Hence, it is quite pertinent to analyse *Kurunthogai* from the perspective of thing theory.

Prominence of the Sangam Thinais (Landscapes)

Before analyzing the aspects of thing theory and their relevance to *Kurunthogai*, it is fundamental to be on familiar terms with the Sangam landscapes which are codified in Sangam literature, which, as noted by Aruna Devi, consists of two types: the literature of *aham* and the literature of *puram*. The Tamil word *aham* means 'inner' and *puram* signifies 'outer'. *Aham* literature is centred on the themes of "love and sexual relationships" which are the internal aspects of human life while *puram* literature spotlights the external aspects such as "heroism, war, valour, ethics, benevolence, philanthropy, social life, and customs" (Devi). During the Sangam Age, Tamil Nadu, based on the geographical setup, was categorized into five different landscapes widely known as five *thinais* namely Kurinji, Mullai, Marutham, Neithal and Palai. The Sangam literature abounds in "physical descriptions of these landscapes, the indigenous people of the area and their preoccupations, and the flora and fauna native to the region" (Adhikari). Every thinai or landscape is named after a flower which is characteristic of that landscape ("Sangam Landscape").

Each thinai is characterized by its own distinct features known as *muthal porul*, *karu porul*, and *uri porul*. As wonderfully documented by Piradhiba Grace, *muthal porul* means "the first characteristics of the thinai" which include "[t]he land, season and time" ("Mullai Thinai"). *Karu porul* implies "gist or the lives of

the thinai," representing "[t]he people, animals, birds, plants, music and musical instruments and God of a particular thinai" ("Mullai Thinai"). Similarly, *uri porul* means "the base characteristics of the poem," symbolizing "[t]he subject of the poems" ("Mullai Thinai"). It also signifies "the 'ozhukkam' i.e., (behaviour or emotions) attributed to a landscape" ("Lesson 1"). Furthermore, the season during which the poetic events occur is called *perumpozhudu*, and the time of the day they occur is known as *sirupozhudhu*.

The flora and fauna, the season, the deity and the musical instruments of every thinai are encoded in Sangam poetry to signify the people's occupations, socio-economic conditions, behaviour patterns and other distinct features of the respective thinais ("Tamil Literature"). Each thinai has its own unique sentimental implication concerning lovers: "Lovers' meetings, patient waiting, lovers' quarrels, separation, and the anxiously awaited return" ("Tamil Literature"). *Kurunthogai*, as a Sangam literary work, is intertwined with the encoded depiction of geographical conditions of the Sangam thinais (landscapes). Hence, the basic details of the five thinais and their poetic attributes are outlined in the following.

Kurinji

Kurinji thinai refers to the mountainous regions and their adjoining lands that contain "forested terrain with verdant slopes, flowers, birds, bees and wildlife" (Adhikari). This thinai derives its name from a flower called *kurinji* (Strobilanthes kunthiana), which blossoms in the mountains once in twelve years. Payal Adhikari's study reveals that the modern day location of the thinai, Kurinji, "corresponds to the western and eastern Ghats in Tamil Nadu and Kerala" (Adhikari). Besides *kurinji* flower, Piradhiba Grace identifies Kanthal (Gloriosa Lily) as another famous flower found on the mountainous slopes ("Kurinji Thinai"). Kurinji thinai is affluent with water sources that include waterfalls. Bamboos, jackfruit trees and venkai trees are plentiful. The 'Kuravars', the indigenous people of the thinai are the chief inhabitants whose major occupations are hunting and gathering of honey. The animals specific to this region are monkeys, elephants, horses and bulls. The weather is very cool. The primary deity worshipped by people in the hilly region is Lord Murugan (or Cheyon). Kurinji thinai is symbolic of midnight and the union of lovers. As outlined by Piradhiba Grace, the poetic events in this thinai occur during "kulir kalam" (cold season) and "munpani kalam" (early dew season). Kulir kalam occurs during the Tamil months, Aippasi (mid October to mid November) and Kaarthigai (mid November to mid December). "Munpani kalam" (early dew season) falls during Maargazhi (mid December to mid January) and Thai (mid January to mid February) ("Kurinji Thinai").

Mullai

Mullai thinai is the region of forests with beautiful pastures. It is usually located at the foothills, and is endowed with rivers. "Its modern day location," writes Adhikari, "is on the foothills of western and eastern Ghats in Tamil Nadu and Kerala" ("Tamil Nadu's Landscapes"). This thinai bears the name of a flower called *mullai poo* (flower of Jasminum trichotomum B.Heyne ex Roth) which specifically blooms in the forestlands. The chief inhabitants of the region are "the cowherds, or the *aayars*, who spent their time herding cattle and playing the flute, just like the eternal Krishna (also called Maayon), their chosen god" (Adhikari). Konrai trees are abundant in this thinai where millet and wild grains are the major crops. The main animal specific to the thinai is deer. According to Piradhiba Grace, the season or *perumpozhudu* during which the poetic events take place in this thinai is "kaar kaalam," i.e. the rainy season that occurs during the Tamil months, Aavani and Purattaasi ("Mullai Thinai"). Sirupozhudhu or the time of the day wherein the poetry of Mullai thinai is set is "'maalai' or evening," i.e. from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. ("Mullai Thinai"). Mullai thinai is emblematic of the ladylove's waiting for her lover who has gone to a distant land for earning money.

Marutham

Marutham thinai, which is named after a flower called *marutham poo* (flower of Terminalia elliptica Willd, a characteristic tree of the land), refers to the agricultural lands and their adjoining areas. Mango trees are abundant in the region, and ponds are the main source of water. This thinai is largely inhabited by farmers. There are also "goldsmiths, artists and blacksmiths" besides "the elite, the rich and the powerful" (Adhikari). The capital towns of kings in the thinai are surrounded by fertile farmlands (Adhikari). "The farmers ploughed in rural Marudham, on the banks of the rivers like Cauvery. People in these areas prospered because of the fertility of the land, making Indra, the god of rain, their preferred deity" (Adhikari). The god, Indra (Wanji-ko or Seyyon), is popularly known as Vendhan in Marutham thinai. Water buffalos and freshwater fish are specific to the thinai. As mentioned by Grace, there are also other common creatures like crocodiles, crabs, lotus, water lilies, herons and pelicans which are portrayed in Marutham thinai poems. Water bodies like wells, rivers and streams too find a place in the land. Other than mango and Marutham trees, we also find Vanji and Kanji trees ("Marutham Thinai"). Piradhiba Grace enlists the *perumpozhudu* or the seasons during which the poetic events take place in the Marutham landscape:

> The 'kulir kaalam' or the cold season, which falls during the Tamil

months '[A]ippasi' and '[K]aarththikai'

The 'kaar kaalam' or the rainy season, which falls during the Tamil months '[A]avani' and '[P]urattaasi'

The 'munpani kaalam' or the early dew season, which falls during the Tamil months '[M]aarkazhi' and '[T]hai'

The 'pin pani kaalam' or the late dew season, which falls during the Tamil months '[M]aasi' and '[P]anguni'

The 'ilavenir kaalam' or the early spring season, which falls during the Tamil months '[C]hiththirai' and '[V]aikaasi'

The 'mudhuvenir kaalam' or the late spring season, which falls during the Tamil months '[A]ani' and '[A]adi'. ("Marutham Thinai")

Sirupozhudhu or the time of Marutham poetic events is "'vaikarai' or early morning", i.e. from 2 a.m. to 6 a.m. ("Marutham Thinai"). Mautham thinai is symbolic of unfaithfulness of the lover, and the resultant anger of his ladylove. The lover leaves his ladylove and indulges in sexual pleasure with concubines. When his ladylove becomes cognizant of his infidelity to her, she suffers from profound mental agony and is immensely angry with her lover. This theme becomes the major *uri porul* or the subject matter of Marutham thinai poems.

Neithal

Neithal thinai denotes the seashore and the regions associated with the sea. It is chiefly is inhabited by fishermen and sailors. It derives its name from the flower, *neithal* (Nymphaea stellata Willd), which is the characteristic flower of the region. There are "different groups of people like Duraivan, Cherppan, Parathavar, Nullayar and Alavar" ("Poems of Neithal Thinai"). The birds such as sea crow and swan, and the animals such as whale and crocodile are specific to this region. People's dwelling area is known as Pattinam and Paakkam. Sand-well is the chief source of water. Punnai tree is a distinct mark of the region, and we find Thaazhai trees as well. The chief occupations of people are fishing and selling salt ("Poems of Neithal Thinai"). The people in this region worship "the ocean god Varuna" (Adhikari). Pining of the ladylove is the *uri porul* (subject matter) of the poems that are set in the Neithal landscape. That is, the lover leaves the ladylove and goes to the deep sea for fishing. The ladylove is anxiously waiting for his safe return, and the delay in his return makes her grief-stricken. Neithal thinai does not have any particular season or *perumpozhudu*. However, the *sirupozhudhu* or the time of the Neithal poetic events is the sunset.

Paalai

Paalai thinai, which is named after *paalai poo* (flower of Wrightia tinctoria) commonly found in the parched region, refers to the wasteland and its adjoining areas. It is "scarcely populated but often frequented by travelers and merchants en route" (Adhikari). People, here, worship the goddess, Durga (Kotravai), who is believed to serve as "a source of the divine rectitude and strength needed to survive in this environment" (Adhikari). Poems set in Paalai thinai depict "the harsher side of nature and its consequences on the lives of the people" (Adhikari), and thus tend to exhibit the pangs of journey undertaken by the couples in the arid wasteland, which also houses the animals like tiger, wolf and sometimes elephants. As water sources are very rare except a few dry wells and stagnant water here and there, cactus becomes the characteristic plant of the land. Summer is the season or *perumpozhudu* of poetic events, and *sirupozhudhu* or the time of their occurrence is the scorching noon. Paalai thinai is associated with the separation of lovers. The poetic attributes of the five thinais which have been discussed so far are part and parcel of *Kurunthogai*. Therefore, one cannot understand *Kurunthogai* without the basic knowledge of the Sangam thinais and their encoded attributes.

The Significance of Things in the Contemporary World

Humans are very closely interlinked with things, and human life is impracticable devoid of material things. In this regard, Sherry Turkle has rightly pointed out that "[w]e live our lives in the middle of things" (6). In the recent times, things have begun to draw the attention of the academic research. Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology are the most apposite examples in this regard. For instance, through his book, *The Democracy of Objects*, Levi R. Bryant, who develops his own object-oriented ontology which he calls onticology, "strives to think a *subjectless* object" (19). As noted by Timothy Morton, "ooo [object-oriented ontology] holds that everything is an object, including the seemingly special one we call *subject*" (63).

In his onticology, Levi R. Bryant too shares the same view that "there is only one type of being: objects" (20) in the world. By this statement, Bryant means that even human beings are "objects *among* the various types of objects that exist or populate the world, each with their own specific powers and capacities" (20). It is in Aristotle's view of the primary substances that Bryant finds the source for the concept of "equality of things" or what he calls "democracy of objects." According to Aristotle, "of the primary substances one is no more a substance than another: the individual man is no more a substance than the individual ox" (as quoted in Bryant

73). The chief tenet of object-oriented philosophy is that it places all entities on equal footing. In this regard, Ian Bogost makes an interesting remark in relation to flat ontology: "*all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally*" (11). That is, flat ontology, as defined by Bogost, affirms that "things can *be* many and various, specific and concrete, while their *being* remains identical" (12).

All object-oriented ontologists denounce human privilege over non-human entities. Graham Harman, a leading object-oriented philosopher, decides to deviate from the conventional philosophy which has failed to emphasize things. He feels that "[t]he inherent reality of things is never addressed" (191). Therefore, he urges philosophy to "turn its attention towards *objects*" (190). Most of the thing-oriented thinkers prefer to advocate a flat world. Tristan Garcia, for example, speaks of a flat world wherein "each thing is neither more nor less than a thing" (31).

As Bill Brown, a foremost thing theorist, claims, these days, there are books on things like "the pencil, the zipper, the toilet, the banana, the chair, the potato, the bowler hat" ("Thing Theory" 2). Today, "history can unabashedly begin with things and with the senses by which we apprehend them" (3). The prominence gained by things is well recorded in the proclamation of Rainer Maria Rilke: "Only things speak to me" (as cited in "Thing Theory" 2). Rilke's view unveils the fact that things play a pivotal role in communicating messages.

The Focal Point of Thing Theory

In an interview with Austin Allen, Bill Brown elucidates that thing theory deals with how "the inanimate object world helps to form and transform human beings alike." That is, thing theory addresses the question, "how does our material environment shape us?" Brown says that it also talks about the production of "value" and "economic value" in Marxist terms, and also various kinds of "symbolic value." Thing theorists, according to him, are concerned with "particular ways of understanding the power and meaning of objects," and are "ultimately interested in the subject/object relation or the human/un-human relation" ("Nature of Things"). It is to be borne in mind that "'thing theory' interrogates the extent to which the subjects construct the objects and, in turn, objects construct subjects" (Bullon-Fernandez 184).

Thing: A Notable Implication

The word "thing" has multiple meanings. In normal sense, the word "thing" refers to "an object whose name you do not use because you do not need to or want to, or because you do not know it," or "an object that is not alive in the way people or plants are" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 1607). It also refers to objects,

clothing or tools used for a particular purpose (1607). To understand the word 'thing' in the light of thing theory, it is quite essential to understand the philosophical meaning of this word. In many of the European languages, the word 'thing' has a link with ancient words for an assembly or a gathering, such as the Icelandic term for Parliament, *Althing* (Morgan 178). To Heidegger, the Old High German word *thing* means gathering. That is, thing is something that gathers.

Kant made a distinction between the "noumena" (the things-in-themselves) and the "phenomena" (things-for-themselves), and he argued that only the latter is accessible to human knowledge (Britto 7). To him, even God is a thing that does not appear. That is, he is a "thing-in-itself". According to Heidegger, "in the language of philosophy both the things-in-themselves and things that appear, all beings that in any way are, are called things" (21). In this context, he says, the word "thing" refers to "whatever is not simply nothing" (21). According to this implication, everything in the universe comes under the category of "thing." In this paper, with the exception of human being, the word "thing" is used with this implication to accommodate even the nonhuman beings in nature such as animals, birds, plants, trees, flowers, fish and so forth.

Select Aspects of Thing Theory in *Kurunthogai*

The Vitality of Things

A central claim of thing theory is that human beings are formed, transformed and controlled by things in several ways. It signifies that like humans, even material things do have vitality and power. This is obvious in the words of Jane Bennett who says that "'vitality is shared by *all* things,' and not limited to ourselves alone" (Shaviro 3). Things, both animate and inanimate, have greater power and control over human beings. For instance, human being has no control absolutely over the natural phenomena like lightening, thunder, storm and so forth. Even a tiny inanimate object, at times, controls a human person to a great extent. For example, a person who happens to get hurt by a tiny and very sharp particle of iron, glass or wooden log, cannot just overlook it and go. The sharp inanimate particle makes him/her stop there and observe what happened. Things play a vital role in the life of every human being. On scores of occasions, human person is formed, transformed and at times shaped by the things he or she encounters. In this context, it is quite essential to know the distinction between objects and things to comprehend how things shape the human subjects.

Distinction between Objects and Things

From the viewpoint of thing theory, there is a difference between objects and things.

This is evident in Bill Brown's answer to the question, "what separates an ordinary *object* from a *thing* worthy of critical study?" asked by Austin Allen in an interview:

> in my work, I understand objects to be, in some sense, what we don't notice. You know, you pick up a glass of water, do you notice the glass? And probably not.Do you notice the water in the glass? Probably not, you're doing this while you're doing something else. But I would say that the thing-ness of objects becomes palpable or visible or in some sense knowable, where there's an interruption within that circuit, the sort of, the circuit whereby we, you know, float, as we do, through objects.
>
> And so it's when objects become excessive one way or another, and I think one way is certainly that they break, right? You go to pick up the glass and it breaks in your hand, suddenly you notice it and you notice lots about it. It's at that moment, I would say, that that object becomes a thing…. ("Nature of Things")

Kurunthogai: Objects Becoming Things Which then Form, Transform and Shape the Human Beings

According to thing theory, as long as an object is seen without being noticed, it continues to be an object to the person who sees it. The object becomes a thing to the person, the moment he/she begins to notice it. When the person begins to look at the things closely and constantly, there is a greater possibility for him/ her to be influenced or shaped by them. The reading of *Kurunthogai*, wherein "things" are in abundance, unveils the fact that the poets, who have composed the poems, were not mere seers of the objects, but observers of "things." In fact, during the Sangam age, the poets were immensely transformed by the natural "things." This is obvious in the observation made by Samy Chidambaranar, who claims that the Sangam poets had so much of aesthetic sense that they were able to infuse their aesthetic sense into the nature and derive pleasure from it. With the noble aim of sharing their joy from nature with the entire world, they replicated in their works the things that they observed in the external nature (34). It means that the Sangam poets did not merely see the objects in nature but observed them meticulously and they were enormously influenced by the 'things' they observed. From this fact, it follows that they were formed, transformed and shaped by the "things." The twenty-first poem of *Kurunthogai* given in the following, followed by its transliteration and illustration will serve as an apt example to demonstrate how ordinary objects become things, and how the things shape the human persons:

Poem 21 from *Kurunthogai*

(Ōdhalānthaiyār 22)

Vaṇdu padath thaintha kodi iṇar idaiyidubu,
Poṉ sei puṉai iḻai kattiya mahaḷir
Kadhuppiṉ thōṉdṟum puthup pūng koṉṟaik
Kāṉam, 'kār' eṉak kūṟiṉum,
Yāṉō thēṟēṉ; avar poai vaḻangalarē.

The paraphrasing of the poem goes like this:

> Long clusters of (golden) beetle-infested flowers have blossomed afresh in between dark green leaves of Konrai trees. They look like maidens' locks adorned with jewels. Even if such a Konrai-grown forest bespeaks of the setting in of the wintry season, I believe it not. For my lord never utters falsehood. (He told me that he would return at the setting in of the winter season. He has not returned yet. So the wintry season could not have set in!). (Mudaliyar 23)

The above-mentioned poem, authored by Ōdhalānthaiyār, is set in Mullai thinai, where the *Konrai* trees contain clusters of blossoms. It is natural for the trees known as *Konrai* to bloom during the winter season. When there are blossoms, it is quite natural for the beetles to go and drink the honey from the flowers. Furthermore, the sight of flowers between the dark green leaves of the *Konrai* trees looks so gorgeous. In the poem, these natural things are not merely seen but noticed by the confidante of a married lady, whose husband has gone on business, entrusting her to her confidante and promising that he would come back before the arrival of the winter. The confidante feels that it is her responsibility to take care of the married woman who has been entrusted to her, and to make her happy till her husband arrives.

Since the flowering of the *Konrai* trees is the mark of the advent of the winter, it does not seem to the confidante as an ordinary object to be just seen and ignored. On the contrary, it makes her notice it closely, shocking her and alarming her of the fact that the husband has not yet arrived and thus he has broken the promise given to his wife, who will, consequently, become love-sick and get grieved over the delay of his arrival. Thus, the object becomes the thing here. The confidante realizes the interruption of the natural objects so much that they make her utter a lie to the

wife in order to save her from agony, saying that her husband is so faithful that he would never break his promise to his wife, and so the winter has not yet arrived, and the *Konrai* trees have blossomed in the wrong season. In actuality, the *Konrai* trees have blossomed in the right season, i.e. winter. But in order to make the woman happy till her husband comes, the confidante puts the blame on the natural things. Here, it is crystal clear how objects can become things, and how things can control, form and shape human beings. Here, what is controlled, formed and shaped is the mental thought of the confidante. This is also applicable to the poet, Ōdhalānthaiyār, who composed this poem. The "things" that he mentions in the poem very clearly illustrate that he has observed the natural "things" which have made him meditate upon them. This pondering over things makes him use them as medium to convey his thoughts.

Things and Ideas: A Contrast

Things Delight us, and Ideas Give us Nausea

Leo Stein, in his book, *The A-B-C of Aesthetics*, says, "Things are what we encounter, ideas are what we project" (as cited in "Thing Theory" 4). Mere recording of ideas or historical elements will not provide a clear understanding of those ideas or history. When they are conveyed through things or in the form of images and symbols, the human mind is able to have a clear and better understanding of the ideas that are conveyed. This is apparent in the Francis Ponge's distinction between "ideas" and "things." According to Ponge, ideas give us queasy feeling or nausea. On the contrary, objects in the external world, give us delight. Francis Ponge affirms that objects may seem substitutable for things. To him, "siding with things" means taking the side of specified objects like doorknobs, figs, crates, blackberries, stoves, water and the like (3). Stated differently, things, for Ponge, are specified objects.

The Link between Things and Ideas in Kurunthogai

Things have played a significant role in *Kurunthogai*, which accommodates love as the major theme. Many poems depict how the ladylove suffers psychologically and becomes physically weak on account of her separation from her lover who has gone to a foreign land to earn wealth. At times, the ladylove becomes infuriated, and laments the stealthy act of her lover who becomes prey to the harlots and enjoys carnal pleasure from them. This is portrayed in some of the poems. Here, it is to borne in mind that if the concept of love, which is recurrent in most poems of *Kurunthogai*, is discussed only in an abstract and theoretical manner, no reader will have any forbearance to read it and appreciate it delightfully. In the words of Francis

Ponge, it would only create queasy feeling or nausea. By contrast, in all most all the poems of *Kurunthogai*, the ideas are conveyed through the 'things' in the natural world in the form of simile, metaphor, objective correlative and other poetic devices. That is why, the readers are able to grasp the ideas, register them in their mind and relish them for years together. This can be explained with the illustration of a poem from *Kurunthogai*:

Poem 54 from *Kurunthogai*
(Mīneri Thūndilār 53)
Yāṉē īṇdaiyēṉē; eṉ nalaṉē
ēṉal kāvalar kavaṇ oli verīyik
kāṉa yāṉai kai vidu pasung gaḷai
mīṉ eṟi thūṇdiliṉ nivakkum
kāṉaha nādaṉodu, āṇdu, oḷinthaṉdṟē.

Mīneri Thūndilār is the author of the poem fifty four, which is set in Kurinji thinai. Samy Chidambaranar beautifully explains the meaning of the poem in the following way. As illustrated by him, the ladylove, in the poem, eagerly expects and believes that her lover, who continues to have secret courtship with her, will come fast and marry her. Shockingly, the lover does not come and marry her as he had promised her. In this situation, the ladylove conveys her anguish to her confidante through this poem. The ladylove says that the hungry elephant in the forest attempts to bend the long-grown bamboo tree and tries to eat the tender part of its twig. In the meantime, the watchman of the millet-fields throws the stones to chase away the birds that are eating the grains in the fields. The elephant, frightened by the noise of the sling-stone, leaves the bamboo tree which it had bent, and so the bamboo tree, with sudden speed, gets straightened again. The bamboo tree, which is bent by the elephant and which is straightened up again after the release, is like the fishing rod, which the fisher man lifts up with baited fish. Through this simile, the ladylove attempts to communicate that she had fallen in love with a man who lives on the hilly region where this beautiful sight occurs. Now, she feels that only her body exists here alone, and that since her lover has not yet married her, she has lost the charm away in the place where she had met him (187-188).

This poem becomes more valuable and significant not because of the lady-love's sharing of her sorrow, but because of the way she uses the "things" in nature to convey her agony, or the way the poet uses the things to convey his ideas in the form of poetic device called simile. As noted by Balachandra Mudaliyar, it is

because of this graphic simile and appropriate phrasing that the writer of this poem came to be known by that appellation (53). In the poem above, if the ladylove were to convey her sorrow to her confidante simply without the simile, the latter would not have been touched so much as now. This example serves as the tip of the iceberg to assert that *Kurunthogai* becomes more delightful and more valuable because of the 'things' that are recorded in it.

Things' Assertion of their Presence

According to Bill Brown, things assert their presence and power on occasions of the following kinds: when you cut your finger on a sheet of paper; when you trip over some toy; when you get bopped on the head by a falling nut. Occasions like these teach us that you are "caught up in things", and that "body is a thing among things," as Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it (as cited in "Thing Theory" 4). In fact, "[t]hey are occasions of contingency — the chance interruption — that disclose a physicality of things" (4).

In *Kurunthogai*, the readers can categorically recognize that the human characters presented in it are "caught up in things." The way they are caught up in things in *Kurunthogai* is to be interpreted. For an instance, in many of the poems, the ladylove, as pointed out earlier, languishes in love-sickness because of the separation of her lover who has gone abroad to earn money for marriage. Hence, she becomes emotionally troubled and her mind becomes turbulent. With this mindset, when she perceives the objects in the world, they become things to her, and even the natural happenings disturb her psyche immensely. Thereby, she is able to associate her psychological and emotional feelings with the things in the world, and encode those things with her suffering. Here is where the things assert their presence and their power over human mind, and this is where the things exhibit their physicality.

Poem 92 from *Kurunthogai*
(Dhāmodharan 92)
Gnāyiṟu patta ahal vāi vāṉatthu—
Aḷiyathāme—kodunch chiṟaippaṟavai,
Iṟai uṟa ōngiya neṟi ayal marāattha
Piḷḷai uḷvāich cherīyia
Irai koṇdamaiyiṉ, viraiyumāl chelav**ē**.

The poem was authored by Dhāmodharan, and it has its setting in Neithal thinai. The lover has gone to a distant land to earn money for his marriage. The ladylove who is separated from her lover is severely suffering from love-sickness and is

longing for his return. In the evening, the ladylove happens to notice the parent birds carrying bits of prey for their young ones in the nest. This sight in nature disturbs the ladylove and enhances her suffering. Thus, the natural "things" create a transformation in her experience of love-sickness and shapes her mindset. That is, it is true that the ladylove languishes over the separation of her lover. This mental suffering, which is normal, is transformed and shaped into severe agony by the things she noticed in nature. The ladylove is not able to overlook and forget the sight she had noticed in nature. On the contrary, she is caught up in things. In other words, the things that she observed in nature make her reflect on them and thereby make her associate her personal agony with them. Thus, the things, assert the presence in the mind of the ladylove. Consequently, the ladylove feels unable to eliminate the presence of things she had observed, and she is transformed by the presence of the sight of the things she noticed in nature.

Methodological Fetishism

Things play a vigorous role in human life. No human being can boldly claim that he or she can live in the world without any thing in the world. In Arjun Appadurai's view, the process of things illuminating the human and social context is what known as methodological fetishism, which means the effort to "follow the things themselves" (6). Put differently, methodological fetishism refers to the process wherein things illuminate the human and social context.

A Contrast between Theoretical and Methodological Point of View: Difference between Human Actors and Things-in-Motion

Based on the idea of the 'fetishism of commodities' drawn from Karl Marx's *Capital*, Arjun Appadurai, in his book, *The Social Life of Things* (1986), makes a distinction between human beings and the things-in-motion (4-5). In his opinion, "from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance," and "from a *methodological* point of view, it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context" (Appadurai 5; "Thing Theory" 6). This idea of Appadurai is very relevant to *Kurunthogai.*

From a theoretical point of view, the human actors (here, the poets of *Kurunthogai*) have encoded the things recorded by them in their poems with immensity of significance, which implies meaning, message or ideas. Here, the human actors also signify the different characters in the poems such as lover, ladylove, confidante and so forth mentioned in the poems. These human actors encode the 'things' with their personal, psychological and emotional feelings. To put it in a nutshell in the context of the analysis of *Kururnthogai*, it can be, in the

light of Leo Stein's view, held that things are what the human actors (here, the poets of *Kurunthogai* or the human characters mentioned therein) encountered, and ideas are what they projected. From a methodological point of view, these things become active and they become "things-in-motion." In this sense, it can be stated that insofar as things are able to illuminate the human mind, they are "things-in-motion." That is, when the readers read the poems of *Kurunthogai*, the things in those poems illuminate the readers' mind and make them look at those things closely to perceive what is conveyed through them. Furthermore, these things illuminate the readers to understand the geographical, human, social, cultural, political, economic and religious context of the Sangam age. Appadurai suggests that "we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories" (5). There are multiple meanings and information inscribed in the things which are depicted in the form of images and metaphors in the poems of *Krunthogai*. Therefore, by following and analyzing the things registered in *Krunthogai*, we will be able to gain immense knowledge about people and their way of life in the Sangam age.

The Familiar Things Becoming Unfamiliar

Beyond the phenomena that we see and touch, one can find some other life and the law of things, the swarm of electrons. Even when the objects are within the field of phenomenality, they often become less clear when we look at them closer ("Thing Theory" 6). In this context, what Georg Simmel said of telescopic technology, in his book, *The Philosophy of Money*, becomes relevant even to things. According to him, "coming closer to things often only shows us how far away they still are from us" (as cited in "Thing Theory" 6). That is, when the most familiar things are closely looked at, they seem unpredictable and inexplicable to poets and physicists (6). Similarly, when the readers read *Kurunthogai*, things that are recorded in it may seem to be ordinary and familiar things. But when they closely read it and look at the objects therein, those objects become things and have many things to convey.

Looking through Things in *Kurunthogai:* Things as the Record of the Past

As pointed out by Bill Brown, we look through the objects to see what they disclose about history, society, nature or culture, above all about us. We look *through* objects because there are codes whereby our interpretative attention makes them meaningful ("Thing Theory" 4). The act of looking through the objects is one of the central facets of thing theory. After reading the first few poems of *Kurunthogai*, a reader who reads it for the first time, may feel excited of its theme. However, as the reading proceeds, he or she may tend to get filled with nausea or queasy feeling because of recurrence of the same topics all through the poems of *Kurunthogai*. Therefore,

a thought may occur in his or her mind as to what need is there for such a huge anthology of 400 poems just to portray the married or private life, secret courtship, illicit affairs, obscenity and prostitution. But a close reading will unveil that besides the depiction of the private life, there are scores of things which are communicated through *Kurunthogai*.

As Brown puts it, "The past seems to reside in objects; historical *insight* seems to be graspable from *inside* the material record, from the way a *genius rei* seems to animate objects with the presence of the past" (*Sense* 112). Timothy Morton also admits that "[e]very object is a marvelous archeological record of everything that ever happened to it" (112). In fact, things in *Kurunthogai* offer an extensive account of the past. When we look *through* the objects or things recorded in the poems of *Kurunthogai* very closely, we can identify the depiction of the geographical regions, history, society, nature, culture and people of the Sangam age. We are also able to study not only people's private life, but also the people's political and social life, their food habits, their gods and their religious practices, rituals, customs, and different types of people. Subsequently, we realize that the *Kurunthogai* is not a mere record of the internal or private life alone, but a treasure house of the natural environment, history, society and culture of the people of the Sangam age. In fact, the poets of *Kurunthogai* used the theme of private life of people as a key to open the door of the huge palace of the Sangam age to notice the "things" which reflect the geographical regions and the people's life associated with them.

Thereby, the subject/ object relation, or human/un-human relation is created between the human beings and the things. That is, the poets, as brilliant observers, have encountered the things in nature, and projected their ideas on them. In other words, they have encoded the things with plentiful ideas and messages. When the readers read the text (here, *Kurunthogai*) and look through things therein, they will be able to receive those ideas or messages which are projected on and encoded through things that are recorded in the poems. Thus, there is a give-and-take relationship between things and human subjects. Thing theory gives importance to this sort of relationship.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Kurunthogai* in the light of thing theory demonstrates evidently how things are quite important in human life and in the academic domain of literature, and how things play a remarkable role in shaping the human subjects. Literature is plentiful of things. When we look through objects, we are able to perceive many things. Furthermore, we will be able to have a glance of the sensuous presence of

things. As Bill Brown says, things could be understood "as what is excessive in objects" and "as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects" ("Thing Theory" 5). The force or "the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems" is known as the sensuous presence or the metaphysical presence of things (5). Hence, it is right time to apprehend the significance of the relationship between literature and things.

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