

## '*Tinai*' in the Western Poetic Locale: Revisiting Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind"

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### Abstract

The idea of a nature-culture continuum is relatively new to Western eco-critical discourse. Nature has been conventionally placed in polar opposition to culture in Western thought. Eco-aesthetics is a critical attempt to rethink and revise the dualistic paradigm extant in nature studies and to integrate nature-culture binaries. In Eastern philosophy, the idea of nature has primordially been conceived as an organic whole inclusive of all beings in nature, beyond any rigid dualistic specificity. The earliest known conception of this is the *Tinai* which is closely associated with Tamil cultural tradition that dates back to the Sangam Period (600 BCE-300 BCE). Although the origin of *Tinai* is regional, its philosophical implications are universal and therefore, could be invariably identified in written texts across cultures. In this paper, I attempt to locate the eco-aesthetic elements in P B Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," by situating and appropriating the eastern ecological philosophy of *Tinai* in the Western ecological/poetic locale and to identify the schema of interconnectedness between time, place and human experience that underlie the text.

**Keywords:** Ambience; Autumn; Culture; Nature; *Tinai*.

The word '*tinai*' literally means to join and therefore has the role of 'joining' or integrating, but it has wider literary, social and geographical connotations. *Tinai* is largely seen as the geographical categorisation of ancient 'thamizhakam' based on its natural-cultural features. It is also considered as a social order that preceded the state order. From the literary perspective, *Tinai* is understood variously as a poetic convention, poetic situation and a genre (Selvamony). Beyond the elementary definitions, *tinai* stands for the poetic amalgamation of landscapes and mindscapes "where the human bhava seeks its correspondence with the natural vibhava" which is integral in depicting the cultural ethos of a place (Murali 157). It is consti-

tuted by three major elements— place-time (*mudal*), natural-cultural features (*karu*) and primary action (*uri*). A.K Ramanujan views it as a “whole language of signs . . . created by relating the landscapes as signifiers to the *uri* or appropriate human feelings” (241).

The earliest and most popular resource for the Tinai philosophy is *Tolkappiyam*, which is a compendium of linguistic and literary conventions of ancient Tamil poetry, believed to be written during the Sangam Period. The *tinai*s are classified into five— *Kurinchi*, *Mullai*, *Palai*, *Marutam* and *Neytal* with their corresponding *mudal*, *karu* and *uri*. *Kurinchi* denotes the hilly region inhabited by hunters. *Mullai* is the pastoral/ forest land, *Palai* is the wasteland/ arid lands, *Marutam* is the wetland/ /riverside and *Neytal* is the coastal area/ seaside. The inhabitants of each *tinai* followed their own naturally evolved occupation and each worshipped its own deity. But the *tinai*s need not be taken as mutually exclusive static entities as they blended and overlapped with each other occasionally which is referred to as *tinai mayakkam*. The poetry of this time was set in these five *tinai*s and the characters were attributed with specific existential and behavioural patterns corresponding to these landscapes. *Tolkappiyam* designates two complementary domains to the *tinai* poetics which are *akam* (inside/interior) and *puram* (the outside/exterior). *Akam* deals with human emotions, predominantly love, whereas *puram* signifies the valorous and ethical dimensions of human nature. The landscapes are interlinked with the mindscapes of the inhabitants, particularly lovers. As Jesudasan and Hephzibah Jesudasan notes in *A History of Tamil Literature*:

We can trace out the life of lovers running through the whole gamut of experiences so provided by the system, from the bloom of the first fresh passion in the greenwood of kurinci through the pain of partings in early wedded life in palai, the patient waiting of the lone woman in mullai, the longing, agonised waiting of the woman in neidal, down to the entry of infidelity into the scene of mature love and quiet domestic happiness in marudam. Into this structure the whole variety of experiences may be fitted, with provision, of course, for variations. (16)

The fundamental link between landscape and literature is universal, though it is manifested variously in varied climes. In the western milieu, the four seasons— spring, summer, autumn and winter are marked by specific weather conditions and ecological peculiarities that impact the flora and fauna of the region. Like the *tinai*s, they have unique spatio-temporal associations with the affective realms of the human mind and signify the

different phases of life between birth and death and to a greater extent signify life itself. Thus the four seasons could be considered the western counterpart of the *tinai*s as they reify the dynamics of nature's correspondences with its beings.

Like the *tinai*, every season has its own *mudal* (place-time), *karu* (natural-cultural features) and *uri* (the primary action). The spring season in the West—its countries largely falling in the Northern Hemisphere—commences in March and ends by June. It is characterized by longer days and shorter nights. The winter snow melts in the temperate climate replenishing rivers and streams thus rejuvenating different life forms. Animals return after hibernation and birds prepare nests for breeding. The trees and plants respond to the season with greener leaves and blossoms. The spring season promotes outdoor activities—in traditional terms—sowing seeds and planting trees and the human world is involved in cultural festivities and celebrations, particularly associated with agriculture. The summer season, which follows the spring occurs between June and September and it is the warmest of all seasons. In the western cultural ethos, summer is associated with growth and maturity. The plentiful availability of sunlight facilitates the growth of plants and trees. It is the peak of activity for the animal species as they indulge in hunting and reproduction. Though summer can be extremely hot and intense in the tropical areas of the world, it is welcome in the west.

As a season that follows summer and precedes winter, autumn is the in-between/intermediary between two extreme eco climatic conditions. In the European continent/ Northern Hemisphere, it begins roughly in September following the summer season and merges into the cold wintry December. The temperature is colder and the duration of day and night are equal. It is a time of abundance that persists after summer and a time of preparation for the ensuing winter. The leaves turn a golden yellow before they are shed by the trees, the phenomenon that explains the pseudonym, 'fall' which is attributed to the season. "Animals gather food in autumn in preparation for the coming winter, and those with fur often grow thicker coats. Many birds migrate toward the Equator to escape the falling temperatures" ("Autumn"). The primary human action is harvesting of the crops that have ripened over time. Harvest festivals are conducted during this season in celebration of the produce.

The winter season is the coldest season of the year which occurs between November/ December and March. It has the shortest days and the longest nights in the whole year. The season is characterised by snow and

frost and the stars are brighter in the sky. Some plants die down during winter while others, along with big trees survive. Several animals go on a hibernation storing energy for the next season while many birds migrate to warmer locales. Winter is symbolic of human passivity and negativity and has been represented in literature as death and hopelessness.

The features discussed above pertain to the place-time of the European/ the Northern Hemisphere which is pertinent to the current study. It is to be noted that the Southern Hemisphere has a reverse sequence of occurrence of the seasons. Though the *mudal* (place-time) varies in the two hemispheres, the *karu* (natural-cultural features) and *uri* (primary action) are identical. Like the *tinais*, all the four seasons are associated with their respective Greek goddesses.

The seasons impact not only the physical realm but also the affective realms of nature's beings. The changing seasons influence the human mind and its temperament i.e. the place-time and the natural- cultural features of every season impact human activities\_\_\_physical and psychological. John Keats in his poem, "The Human Seasons" identifies the interconnectedness of the seasons and the human mind:

Four Seasons fill the measure of the year;  
 There are four seasons in the mind of man:  
 He has his lusty Spring, when fancy clear  
     Takes in all beauty with an easy span:  
 He has his Summer, when luxuriously  
 Spring's honied cud of youthful thought he loves  
     To ruminate, and by such dreaming high  
     Is nearest unto heaven: quiet coves  
 His soul has in its Autumn, when his wings  
     He furleth close; contented so to look  
     On mists in idleness – to let fair things  
     Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook.  
 He has his Winter too of pale misfeature,  
 Or else he would forego his mortal nature.

Here, the four seasons are presented as existing in the human mind, inseparable from each other. This seamless correspondence between man and nature forms the core idea of *Tinai* and of the emerging environmental aesthetics in the West—Eco-aesthetics. “Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman” (Morton 5). Nature is not an entity to be dualistically set against culture, both nature and culture are to be seen as part of an organic whole impacting each other. This philosophy is crucial in addressing the contemporary crisis in the relation between man and nature. A re-reading of classical texts in western literature will enable us to look into the universality of the *Tinai* philosophy and its significance in contemporary times. The dividing line between nature and culture becomes a blurred space that sets the ambience of the poetic locale. “The idea of nature is all too real, and it has an all too real effect upon all too real world” (Morton 19).

The four seasons have been amply represented in Western poetics and among them, the autumn season by far has found a significant place in the Western poetic locale. The English poet, John Keats describes the autumn season as the “Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness” (“Ode to Autumn” 1). The autumn season stands for ripening and maturing and at the same time, for decline and decay. It is a longing for the past and a yearning for the future. In Greek mythology the autumn season is attributed to the goddess, Carpo.

Among the several poems that represent the autumn season, P.B Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” is a quintessential nature poem with regard to the autumnal ambience that it generates through the portrayal of the west wind as a force of destruction and regeneration. A close reading of the poem, “Ode to the West Wind” will enable us in decoding the ‘*tinai*’ or the ‘literary space’ in which the poem is situated. In the note that Shelley appended in *Prometheus Unbound*, he talks about the spatio-temporal conditions that inspired this composition.

This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains. They began, as I foresaw, at sunset with a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisalpine regions. (188)

This note clearly defines the ambient space of the text. Ambience, as Timothy Morton says, “denotes a sense of a circumambient, or surrounding world” (33). It is the ‘situatedness’ of the text; the oneness of the subject and the object.

“Ode to the West Wind” is addressed to the west wind which is the vital force that pervades the autumn season. The poet begins by addressing the west wind as “the breath of autumn’s being” (Shelley 1). It is the embodiment of autumnal spirit and energy, the binding force that links the material with the non-material, the human with the non-human, the animate with the inanimate.

The place-time (*mudal*) of the season is articulated in the lines that describe the wind as the “dirge of the dying year” that wakes up the Mediterranean from its summer dreams with its “congregated might of vapours” that burst with “black rain, and fire, and hail. . .” (28). Hence the autumn season acts as a mighty interlude after the calm and pleasant summer season. It is the all-pervasive force – “Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere; / Destroyer and preserver. . .” (13-14). The autumnal energy is manifested in the west wind that carries the “winged seeds” to their “cold grave” for the “azure sister of the Spring” to wake them up. The primary action of the west wind here is the preservation of life. It holds immense energy capable of generating life after death. The wind internalizes the libidinal energy that produces and sustains life and this same energy is assimilated into the persona of the poem who aspires to be like the wind—fierce and impetuous. The primary purpose of the wind as the preserver of life, is symbolic of the season that it represents and the primary action (*uri*) of the living beings pertaining to this place-time. After the hibernating period of winter, the spring season resumes from where the autumn has left off, filling the plains and hills with “living hues” (12). The seasons are presented here as interdependent links constituting the network that sustains the lifecycle. Like the *tinai*s, each season is embodied with distinctive features and functions that significantly impact the landscape and the beings in it.

The images of the fierce wind and the fallen leaves on the ground, “Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red/ Pestilence-sticken multitudes” (3-4) denote the natural-cultural features (*karu*) of the season and signify the symbolic nature of its geography.

The central idea of *tinai* is the interdependence of all beings and their embeddedness within the fabric of nature. It is a system of correspondences. The geographical features, the forces in nature such as wind, water, earth

and fire and the beings in nature affect each other. In "Ode to the West Wind," the poet hopes to partake with the vitality of the wind, which he believes, would lift him from the burden of "the heavy weight of hours. . ." (55).

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;  
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;  
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share  
The impulse of thy strength, only less free  
Than thou, O uncontrollable! (43-47)

Here, the poet aspires to be one with the autumnal spirit. Nature is not portrayed as a thing that exists outside but as one that is merged into the poet's self. He urges the wind to carry him like a wave or a leaf or a cloud. He sees in himself a kindred spirit of the wind, "tameless, swift and proud" (56). He looks up to the wind to lift him from the burdens of life, making him the lyre as his leaves too start falling like that of the autumnal forest. Thus the poem marks the correspondences in nature that generate meaning in every point of its intersection.

Seasons signify not only geographical space and time, but kinds of human conduct and temperament. Literature invokes the ambient space of nature and connects it to human action and consciousness. Hence, in the western poetic locale, poems such as the "Ode to the West Wind" become the aesthetic counterpart to *tinai*s, integrating *mudhal*, *karu* and *uri*, signifying the interconnected web of relationships and the seamless co-existence of nature's beings.

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