



**THEATRE OF WAR AND DRAMATURGICAL TRANSFORMATION:
A TEXTUAL AND PERFORMANCE-BASED STUDY OF SELECTED
PLAYS BY K.M. SHANMUGALINGAM**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines five selected dramatic texts by the well-known Sri Lankan Tamil theatre playwright Kulanthai M. Shanmugalingam. Most of his scripts reflect the issues encountered by masses during the period of internal conflict and war in the country. In the context of Tamil theatre, the number of production of dramatic text is in decline, which is currently a scholarly concern. This exploration aims to urge novice writers to learn about contextual, structural and artistic aspects. In addition, this investigation will enable students, pedagogical practitioners, scholars and critiques to have insights into how social issues can be brought out through artistic expressions and perceive the propensity in social, political, cultural domains. This study employed a qualitative framework, and data were gathered by reading the texts and watching the plays. When it comes to the perspective of reading for text analysis, the post structural approach was adopted more frequently than the formalist one. This study argues that the setting of war influences dramaturgical practice tendencies along with the form and aesthetics of theatrical illustration. His plays produced amid armed conflict reflect stylized theatrical forms, which were often employed to interact effectively and share intended messages with public swiftly. It also emerged that various sensitive factors were brought out through symbolic and metaphorical expressions. The side effects that stemmed from during the peak of the armed conflict led to the transition from already existed stylized form to realistic form since some messages had to be conveyed to the public overtly. The findings of the research are beneficial to practitioners related to theatre education, sociology.

Key Words: Tamil Theatre, War, Nonrealistic, Transformation, Realism.



INTRODUCTION AND BRIEF OVERVIEW OF TAMIL DRAMATIC TEXT IN SRI LANKA.

This study is conducted based on dramatic texts. Research on Tamil theatre has predominantly focused on modern theatrical performances and traditional theatre forms. Particularly in Sri Lanka, theatre studies expanded into diverse areas after Drama and Theatre were introduced as subjects in schools and universities. These studies have examined theatrical performances from social, political, cultural, and aesthetic perspectives. Although numerous theatrical performances emerged during the wartime period, comprehensive scholarly studies on them remain limited. Moreover, dramatic texts have largely been approached within educational curricula for academic purposes rather than as subjects of critical research inquiry. The early traditions of Tamil theatre were primarily rooted in traditional forms and ritual practices. During this period, performances were transmitted mainly through oral traditions rather than written scripts. However, various restrictions affected the continuation of traditional forms and ritual performances. The introduction of Western theatrical forms brought new developments and transformations to Tamil theatre. Furthermore, with the arrival of the printing press, dramatic texts began to be published more extensively. Examining dramatic texts from the colonial, postcolonial, and particularly the thirty-year wartime period provides significant insight into the theatrical trends and social conditions of those periods. Such an approach helps to understand the historical evolution and changing dynamics of Tamil theatre.

Kulanthai M. Shanmugalingam (1931–2025) wrote over two hundred plays in various kinds of genres and topical issues. Shanmugalingam's scripts are readable, yet they convey distinct points of view and dynamic forms rather than keeping to a traditional linear system of writing. Brecht's scripts can be considered readable texts that do not conclude complete meanings, as Liyanage (2016, p. 46) pointed out, citing Roland Barthes. From the beginning of the war through its intensification and eventual conclusion, he documented the experiences of a community and a historical period through his dramatic writings. His contribution was central to the emergence of new trends in modern Tamil theatre. His plays laid an important foundation for socially engaged theatrical practices within the Tamil theatrical tradition. His



Journal of Educare (JoE)
(A Peer Reviewed Bi-Annual Journal)

ISSN: 3048-9652 (Online)

www.educare.aliah.ac.in

dramatic approach changed dramatically during the Sri Lankan civil war, particularly after the riots in 1983. The conflict had an effect on his plays' style, content and form. Shanmugalingam applied play as a tool for reflection and engagement while living in a theatre of war and creating works for it.

In both academic contexts and among theatre practitioners, dramatic text analysis has gradually received limited attention. Therefore, understanding how social movements and social realities are artistically constructed through drama is highly important in the contemporary context. This study will be valuable for scholars and practitioners engaged in Drama and Theatre Studies, particularly in areas such as dramatic literature, script writing, script analysis, theatre and society, participatory theatre, and community theatre. Examining socio-political and cultural reflections in theatre also enables society to be understood from a historical perspective. Furthermore, this study is significant for academics and researchers because conclusions drawn from artistic representations of lived social realities can contribute meaningfully to understanding and shaping future social conditions. In particular, understanding how various dimensions of war are reflected in drama, and how war transformed theatrical forms and aesthetics, is essential for both theatre studies and sociological inquiry.

The history of dramatic texts in Sri Lankan Tamil modern theatre and their socio-political contexts are briefly overviewed. Kanapathipillai introduced realistic plays of colloquial Tamil with melodramatic structure (Sokkalingam, 1977, p. 112) while post-1956 political awareness inspired new theatrical directions (Maunaguru, 1993, p. 162). and Vithiyananthan's traditional adaptations marked further shifts, leading to traditional *Kooththu* plays like *Ravanesan*. The 1956 political changes marked the starting point of ethnic conflict and its consequent riots. Sanjeewa quoted the Peebles pointed out that Sinhalese mobs then attacked the Tamils in Colombo; violence broke out in Trincomalee and Jaffna. (Sanjeewa 2021, p.826). Consequently, a play addressing ethnic issues, *Thurokikal* Traitors 1956), was written by Kanapathippillai.

Scholars and artists such as Tarcisius *Poruththathu Pothum* (Enough of Keeping Patience 1979) and Maunaguru *Sankaram* (Annihilation 1980) used the *Kooththu* form to



critique caste and class hierarchies (Sokkalingam, 1977, p. 238). These plays also reveal anti-capitalist tendencies and demonstrate an affinity toward communist ideologies. In the post-ethnic conflict period, theatrical productions began to bring out the profound impact of the riots and violence experienced by communities. For instance, Elaya Pathmanathan's play *Thodar Kathai* the Serialized Story 1984) addresses themes of sexual violence (Pathmanatham 2000, 79). During this time, the thematic focus of theatre transitioned from social and class hierarchies to issues related to ethnic conflict and civil war. Within this context, Shanmugalingam emerged as a significant figure, introducing a new theatrical approach that engaged directly with the realities of war. However, other local artists also produced many literary works related to the conflict.

Studies on Tamil theatre have largely concentrated on theatrical performances and theatre history rather than on dramatic literature or dramatic texts. Limited attention has been given to examining how drama reflects society and politics, the underlying ideological tensions within dramatic texts, and the artistic methods through which such realities are represented.

In particular, the dramatic writings of Kulanthai M. Shanmugalingam have not been studied in depth from a critical research perspective. His representation of the multiple dimensions of the Sri Lankan civil war across various plays remains a significant area requiring scholarly investigation.

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND OBJECTIVES

In the contemporary context, there is a noticeable decline in the production of literary-quality dramatic texts suitable for theatrical performance. Drama is often reduced merely to dialogue and stage presentation, resulting in performances that disappear once the enactment concludes. Theatre is essentially an ephemeral art form; therefore, without properly structured dramatic texts, it becomes difficult to understand a society through theatre or to reproduce performances for future generations.

A well-developed dramatic text is essential not only for theatrical performance but also for preserving social memory and historical realities. To understand what occurred within



society during particular historical periods, dramatic texts must possess substantial literary and artistic qualities. Without such textual foundations, both the theatrical work and the social experiences embedded within it risk disappearing over time.

- To analyze the literary and performance aspects of the selected Shanmugalingam's plays.
- To identify different forms and styles that emerged in various periods due to the impact of war.
- To explore his dramatic texts as political, cultural, and reflections during the wartime reflections
- To examine the contextual elements of Shanmugalingam's scripts that are useful for the novice playwrights.
- To provide young playwrights with insight into how to write dramatic texts that incorporate both with aesthetic nuances and social responsibility.

RESEARCH APPROACHES AND METHODS

This section provides an overview of how dramatic texts, performances and experiences influenced this research process. The researcher constitutes an integral component of the research process and simultaneously serves as an informant during data collection. This investigation centres on the five plays *Maathorubhaagam*¹ (A Half of Woman, 1984), *Mansumantha Meniyar* (With Sweat and Dust on Their Shoulders, 1985), *Mansumantha Meniyar II* (1986), *Annai Idda Thee* (The fire lit by the mother 1991), and *Enthayum Thayum* (Land of our For Fathers, 1992). These particular plays were chosen as they were master pieces in terms of quality of dramatic text and effective performances. The local war had different turning points over time, each characterized by major events; for example, the play *Maathorubhaabagam* reflects the 1983 riot; the play *Mansumantha Meniyar* was written when the armed conflict got intensified, and the situation was precarious; *Mansumantha Meniyar II* was based on the internal conflict among different Tamil militants; the next play *Annai Idda Thee* brought out trauma and anguish that people psychologically went thorough during the



Journal of Educare (JoE)
(A Peer Reviewed Bi-Annual Journal)

ISSN: 3048-9652 (Online)

www.educare.aliah.ac.in

conflict. *Enthayum Thayum* talks about the hopeless and helpless elderly parents whose children were forced to migrate to foreign countries. These plays were also selected to closely examine the transition process of presenting about community to individuals. This transition process was observed during the performances of those plays.

A dramatic text comprises various elements; through the analysis of the each element, data were collected. Since the researcher and the playwright share the same historical, political and cultural background, they were able to easily perceive the interrelated events prior to or after a particular incident. As a member of the Tamil community the researcher was able to delve deep into textual and inter textual aspects. His positionality is based on this connection to the people who experienced the intensity of the war. Since the internal conflict ceased in 2009, the researcher was able to look into the plays objectively. The limitations of reflexivity is that, the researcher, as an inherent member of the Tamil community, is more likely to be subjective. Nevertheless, if the researcher happened to cross the limit of subjectivity, it would pose a challenge to him.

The knowledge and experience the researcher gained from watching the plays was compared with the dramatic texts and then with the written documents related to the performances. Later, the gathered data were triangulated with the forewords written by the playwright for the book that contained his plays. The theoretical framework provides support for the textual and performance analyses, the data collection process, and the researcher's positionality outlined above.

Subjectivity of the researcher relates to the Fischer-Lichte's statement on performance analysis "Ultimately, every analysis is subjective, based on the subjectivity of our perception. This subjectivity is a fundamental condition of every analysis" (Fischer-Lichte, 2014, p.50). At the same time, it is essential that the researcher observes his own subjective experiences through an objective lens. When reflecting on personal events from the past, such experiences should be analyzed as objectively as possible, given the retrospective nature of such reflection. Directors and researchers have applied the Aristotle's structural model of beginning, middle, and end in analyzing drama (Kiely 2016, p. 5), employing formalist methods to investigate the



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(A Peer Reviewed Bi-Annual Journal)

ISSN: 3048-9652 (Online)

www.educare.aliah.ac.in

six elements of drama alongside time, place, and action (Thomas, 2009, p. XX). While formalist analysis provides a foundational frame, this study incorporates post-structuralist approaches to examine dramatic texts. Haseman (2007, p. 151) highlights performative research's focus on non-numeric data, symbolic representations, material forms, moving images while Grbich (2007, p. 170) notes that structural analysis reveals linguistic systems and cultural values. As an outcome, the present research investigates how stage instructions and dramatic dialogue reveal many issues with different degrees of significance. Derrida says that texts have no fixed centre and merely highlight the act of continuous disclosure, echoing Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle (Leach, 2008, p. 19). Derrida's deconstruction, that sees centrality as unstable, challenges structuralism's definition of systems, and this is based on coherent and fixed centrality (Grbich, 2007, p. 175). The partial review of the scripts of *Maathorubhaagam* (1984), *Mansumantha Meniyar* (1985), *Annai Idda Thee* (1991), and *Enthayum Thayum* (1992), where multiple components emerge both from the text's centre and outside, is particularly important to these theoretical viewpoints.

As a researcher, the study was driven by direct interaction and discussions with the playwright alongside textual analysis and performance witnessing. The concept of reflexivity, a demand for the researcher to analyze their own opinions, values, and methodologies, is supported by this reflexive approach in which the researcher appears as a part of the study itself (Hammond & Wellington, 2013, p. 129). In this particular case, the researcher's personal exposure to Shanmugalingam's plays through watching many performances and taking part in rehearsals adds to this analysis. Additionally, the researcher's political, social, and cultural background, particularly lived experiences during the wartime period in home country, has an impact on the reading of these texts. This aligns with Fischer-Lichte's view that "in performance analysis, one becomes a part of the performance processes one intends to analyze" (Fischer-Lichte, 2014, p. 49). In dramatic analysis, the researcher's lived experience intersects with staged events. This is also in line with Buddhist thought, as Fernando (2009, p. 4) states: one must test written ideas through personal experience and contemplation. Performance research spans text, visuals, sound, and human emotion, making it unsuitable for a single



theoretical model. It operates between theory and lived experience, often seen as anti-disciplinary (Kershaw & Nicholson, 2011, p. 3) or interdisciplinary (Hayford, 2022, p. 172). This study adopts both qualitative and performative methods, guided by some aspects of post-structuralism theory and on an empirical level supported by narrative analysis.

DRAMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF WAR: SOCIAL REFLECTIONS AND ALLEGORICAL NARRATIVES

Shanmugalingam's creations are often probed from the perspective of blending author and text. However, his dramatic texts must be investigated, taking his community, its culture, attitude and tradition into consideration. This research does not seek to claim Shanmugalingam's plays as inherently superior works of theatre. Rather, it approaches them as nuanced reflections of a society's complex realities of war. In this regard, the plays resonate with Michel Foucault's perspective that texts and cultural productions serve as expressions of broader social and historical dynamics. As Barrett explains, "Foucault tells us that the understanding of author as function is often undermined by a tendency to privilege more traditional notions of 'the work' as an entity and the artist as a unique creator of the work" (Barrett, 2007, p. 136). Post structuralism approach provides insight into the analysis of textuality and intertextuality, it is employed to examine how the playwright engages with past experience. The plays, investigated here, reflect four different periods of the community and ethnic conflict. In these plays, appropriate theatre styles and techniques are used to bring out the issues.

Riots, Ethnicity, and Cultural Identity in Theatre

Shanmugalingam's work addresses social issues such as lapses in the education system, privatization of education, women's struggles, and aspirations to migrate. The 1983 Black July riots had lasting psychological and social effects on people, which are reflected in his post-1983 plays. *Maathorubhaagam*, for example, depicts a family traumatized by ethnic violence and further oppressed by cultural norms, combining earlier social themes with new concerns of ethnic conflict and the hardships of female wage laborers.



Following the 1983 ethnic riots, his play *Madhorubagam* vividly brings out the experiences of families affected by the riots in a calm, clear, and balanced manner. This neutrality and clarity are evident in the following excerpt from the play.

Nandini : *Oh, it was only beasts who dragged my father out from home to the road, poured petrol over him.*

Janaki : *When the mob of savages came, Perera family who saved us while we ran to the next house.*

Orator III: *Perera? Isn't that a Sinhalese?*

Singer III: *A Sinhalese protected you?!!*

Janaki : *Oh yes, it was a Sinhalese family who protected us.*

Nandini : *Not just you. Every Tamil who survived from the outside was, in some way, saved by a Sinhalese.*

Singer I : *Then! So there are good people among them too.*

Janaki : *They are also good more than we are.*

Nandini : *Good and bad people exist everywhere. (Shanmugalingam 1987, p. 40)*

Civil War and the Stylization of Theatrical Form

In the play *Mansumantha Meniyar*, the playwright vividly exposes the deficiencies within the educational system and the struggles of the working class, alongside a critical examination of the war that emerged because of ethnic conflict and its enduring effect. This play originated, incorporating the past theatrical experiences. The following statement substantiates this, “while observing *Mansumantha Meniyar*, it becomes evident how the play emerges as an infant of past theatrical traditions.”(Sivathamby, 1998, p. 64). Besides, while the theme of war in a dualistic context is presented only to a minimal extent in Shanmugalingam’s earlier play *Mathorubagam*, it assumes a dominant thematic position in *Mansumantha Meniyar*, becoming a central aspect of the play.

The play under discussion captures this post-1983 context of intense militarization and conflict in a comprehensive manner. The state’s oppression by military was merely hinting a



Journal of Educare (JoE)
(A Peer Reviewed Bi-Annual Journal)

ISSN: 3048-9652 (Online)

www.educare.aliah.ac.in

reflecting a kind of self-censorship or deliberate restraint, even though the violent situation that exists in a war zone is depicted. Pickering's statement, "the playwright creates a montage of impressions and images instead of a story line," relates to the dramatization's use of symbolic representations and coded language to convey delicate themes by not using leaner storytelling (2005, p. 35). Through symbolic representations and coded language, the play shows the post-1983 context of violence and conflict as quietly reflecting on political brutality through strategic restraint. Pickering points out the use of disconnected, non-linear storytelling to draw focus on sensitive topics and uphold self-censorship.

"Friends: Otherwise? At least ten!" Do you consider the boys to be bottle gourds? (Shanmugalingam 2007, p. 08). This utterance contains or the conversations have several meanings: "boys" indicates members of the Rebel Movement, and "at least ten" implies the deaths of the military personal. The words "bottle gourds" reflects the force and effectiveness of these fighters by implying that they are anything expected. While Shanmugalingam's avoiding of specific words like "military" indicates a careful approach driven by political sensitivity, this demonstrates civilians' understanding of military processes.

Throughout the play, this technique is applied often, as in "Kin: there is trouble in Chunnakam*, they say." "Neighbor: to Sannathi; is it true that they have suffered severe casualties at Sillalai*?" and "I could hear the rumblings." (Shanmugalingam 2007, pp. 07–08), which indirectly refers to violence and human casualties. As in "First narrator: Like crows flying at the sound of crackers we run aimlessly at every noise" (p. 10), Shanmugalingam blends symbol and metaphor to show the horror of war, including unexpected attacks and mass killings, reflecting the widespread fear of wartime life. The helicopter flying beyond a Palmyra tree acts as a metaphor to aerial warfare: "Kin: Walk faster. High above the Palmyra's crown, the "flying ship" is heard" (Shanmugalingam 2007, p. 12). In this particular instance, "flying ship"² refers to the threat of helicopter attacks, which were routine on impassable ground situations during the time.

Through metaphor and sensory representations, the unpredictable nature and prevalence of violence, caused by the armed forces working within common places, is



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(A Peer Reviewed Bi-Annual Journal)

ISSN: 3048-9652 (Online)

www.educare.aliah.ac.in

effectively communicated. “Homes, streets, and places have turned as cremation grounds,” laments an elderly character. “The burning is illuminated by the sun.” and “The rains do the cleansing” (Shanmugalingam 2007, p.13) reveal how common locations can become areas of grief. “A clutter of noises, sounds, wails and screams” (p. 18) further highlights the chaos of war by expressing the emotional distress of natives. As seen by the ironic exchange, Shanmugalingam additionally discusses the media portrayals by using the voices of ordinary people who reinterpret news reports: “Friend: So what else? The rich will have a field day” and “Second Narrator: The richest Tamils took the chance to settle down in Madras” (pp. 18, 20) brings out inequality in society and the variety of civilian responses to conflict.

The pre-1983 ideological context, when many artists, inspired by communist and socialist views, used theatre to speak out against caste and class inequality, must be taken into account in order to comprehend the play’s intentions. Globally, there was a similar transition with the start of wars frequently shifting the dominant ideologies. In accordance with Zarrilli, “a new wave of theatrical activism was sparked as the Cold War divided communist and liberal nation-states around the world after World War II” (Zarrilli, 2010, p. 324). However, this ideal ended after the 1983 riots, and the consequences endured. The plays on ethnic tensions later reflected the effects of communist ideology, as dramatized in some plays during certain periods. This observation correlates with Sri Lankan reality. Shanmugalingam conveys this past by focusing attention on suffering of the vulnerable and addressing both class struggle and ethnic violence. The play is portrayed as a commentary of war and a reflection on class inequality at times of national crisis because of the way he presents the affluent fleeing conflict while the less fortunate experience it, highlighting an ongoing engagement with a communist influenced approach (Shanmugalingam, 2007).

Shanmugalingam questions wartime emigration in *Mansumantha Meniyar* as an act of social irresponsibility more than just a pragmatic action. He criticizes people who leave their country for security reasons by portraying it as an abandoned sense of social responsibility. The dialogue, “First Narrator: They abandon their neighbors, their community, their challenges and want their individual escape” (Shanmugalingam 2007, p. 18), clearly conveys this



viewpoint and emphasizes the moral conflict between one's own survival and collective responsibility. By highlighting how people sell ancestral lands in anticipation of receiving remittances, Shanmugalingam emphasizes the negative economic effects of migration. The line implies this "Father: We can buy it back when son starts to send money from overseas" (Shanmugalingam 2007, p. 26). However, as land prices rise mainly because of foreign revenue, such hopes prove impossible: "1st Narrator: Foreign money increases the price of land" (p. 25). As families try to keep marriages through sending money home from abroad, the play additionally shows how cultural and gender expectations are intertwined with economic targets: "Mother: We can have our daughters marry the youths who have gone abroad!" (p. 25).

Additionally, the drama carefully comments on media and global connectivity. In one scene, characters are portrayed enthusiastically listening to Indian broadcasts, specifically Trichy News and Madras Regional News⁹ Shanmugalingam's play shows a dynamic interaction between Tamil conflict zones and India by demonstrating how Sri Lankan Tamils listened to Indian media for hope and solidarity. The drama explores migration as an escape plan and a morally difficult choice while portraying the daily realities of the ongoing conflict.

Through the application of chorus, narratives, songs, and traditional Koothu practices, the drama's construction unifies collective experiences in an artistically attractive way. Focusing on various activities has significance because it facilitates the urgent sharing of various topics pertaining to the effects of conflict. The drama also includes amusing aspects like proverbs, folk and spiritual songs, and comedy, and all of which increase the play's appeal and access to a broader audience. The community as a whole is portrayed by the characters. Character names such as "Friend," "Neighbor," "Relative," "Kin," "Father," "Brother," "He," "She," and "Anyone," for instance, represent an immense variety of social identities rather than particular identities.

The performance, which was staged more than sixty times around Jaffna peninsula, was frequently interrupted by military activity. Director Sithampanathan's statement, "Due to military activities the theatrical tour had to be carried out carefully and slowly cautiously" (1998, p. 7), illustrates how theatre functioned in a militaristic situation.



This shows the relationship between creative expression and militarized environment, where theatre developed into a medium moulded by the reality of conflict along with a means of resistance. Understanding *Mann Sumandha Meniyar*'s performance and its connections to the liberation movements is important for recognizing its political importance. All of the main groups supported the play in 1985, but by 1986, Shanmugalingam's continuation, *Mann Sumandha Meniyar II*, had to confront with these liberation groups' growing internal disagreements. The drama investigated how strategic and ideological divides caused factions to fight or attack one another, resulting in fragmentation with severe social repercussions. Nevertheless, due to the tense political climate, the sequel faced severe performance restrictions. As Sivathamby observes, "Shanmugalingam's decision to follow up with *Mann Sumandha Meniyar II* and the fact that it could not be staged due to ideological conflicts within the youth movements must be recorded as significant historical evidence" (1997, p. 6).

Following the limited performance of *Mann Sumandha Meniyar II* (1986), the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Accord was signed, and the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) were deployed in Sri Lanka until 1990. However, the resumption of civil war shortly took place, which later led Shanmugalingam to write a new play, *Annai Itta Thee* in 1991.

The Psychological Impact of War and the Rise of Therapeutic Theatre

Annai Itta Thee marked a transition in focus from the structural and political dynamics of war to the intense psychological trauma experienced by civilians during its rapid increase. He courageously brings these social repercussions and oppressive practices to the stage. As Sivathamby notes, "Shanmugalingam openly addressed issues that many others hesitated to articulate." (1997, p. 5). The significance of theatrical ability to express is shown by the following note: "Drama is a powerful social method to create awareness and express collective emotions. Shanmugalingam and Sithambranathan of the Jaffna University produced a play called *Annai Itta Thee* which was a socio drama on the psychological effects of war" (Ranasinha 2013, p. 84) whereas *Mann Sumandha Meniyar* illustrated how the rich and the poor responded to war differently, pointing out the reality that the wealthy often had more opportunities of escape, *Annai Itta Thee* expanded the focus to show how people from various



Journal of Educare (JoE)
(A Peer Reviewed Bi-Annual Journal)

ISSN: 3048-9652 (Online)

www.educare.aliah.ac.in

socioeconomic situation from the highly educated to the average citizen and from the poor to the rich, were psychologically affected by the war.

The play, which was staged in 1991, gave a substantial contribution to the public's awareness of the psychic damage caused by war. Pathmanathan points out, "the play's attempt to offer group therapy for the audience is commendable," recognizing its therapeutic potential (1997, p. 177). Its psychological impact is further illustrated by psychiatrist Somasuntharam, who says, "As a form of psychodrama, when public problems are presented on stage, the play triggers responses in the spectators' own suppressed emotions, communicating them through the characters and helping them free themselves from psychological problems" (1997, p. 160).

Torture, suicide, sexual harassment, military violence, kidnappings, and the risks of traveling through militarized areas with continuous security and battle were clearly addressed in the play. It raised attention to an increasing number of disappearances and the widespread psychological harm caused to ordinary people. The performance's emotional depth and historical rightness have been highlighted by Sivathamby (1997, p. 6), who says "the mental wounds inflicted by war are articulated with profound historical integrity and aesthetic sensitivity."

The play, which focuses on a community that became a target of military attacks, utilizes character dialogue to illustrate the horrific events of 1987. A girl, who was left alone at home during one such attack was assaulted sexually and ended her life by jumping into a well. Gauri who heard about the cruelty, is greatly disturbed by the incident, which is subsequently related to her in a sensationalized way. Moments like this show her anxiety and mental distress: "Gauri: Don't do anything to me, please! Instead, kill me! Just keep your hands off me!"³ (Shanmugalingam 2021, p. 130). In order to enhance the intensity of emotion while preserving narrative sensitivity, Shanmugalingam notably avoids using the word "rape", instead he chooses metaphorical and allusive language.

"Good beatings, kicks, *Sirasasana*, *Simhasana*, eslon pipe, wire, iron rods-everything... Five days of festival..." is how Vakeesan, a character in the play, recalls the cruelty he faced. The *Thavil* drum played by everybody who came and went (Shanmugalingam 2021, p. 136).



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Sanmugalingam prevents overloading an already traumatized spectator by employing stylized and metaphorical language which mixes realism with poetic imagery rather than portraying such brutality directly. Characters often mention the ICRC's efforts in tracking down missing people, indicating that finding them could result in their death (Shanmugalingam 2021, p. 130). The incident of coerced disappearances also occurs frequently. In order to reduce psychological discomfort, the playwright incorporates proverbs, poetry, religious and folk melodies, and comical relief, providing the audience psychological harmony throughout the story of the play.

The play effectively dramatizes the reality of military checkpoints throughout the war. At the apron of the stage, a specific event at the Thandikulam* checkpoint in Vavuniya is performed out. The following dialogues highlight the violent checkpoint, the intermittent firing, and the risk posed by nearby landmines: "A landmine! God Muruga! "Save us," "stop!" "Lie down," "going to shoot" (Shanmugalingam, 2021, p. 103). It further highlights how transportation was affected throughout the period of crisis. The conversation of the Government Agent (GA) character who travels long distances by bicycle⁴ reflects the many changes in routes triggered by ongoing conflicts (Shanmugalingam, 2021, p. 107).

Shanmugalingam transformed the theatrical emphasis from revolutionary idealism to the psychological reality of war trauma through the play *Annai Itta Thee*, emphasizing awareness, healing, and the long-term effects of continuous assault on civilian life. In *Mansumantha Maniyar* the structure of the narration and the expression of the characters are in the form of anti realistic nature and non-learner narratives. The following changes should be observed that *Annai Idda Thee* is in the anti - realistic setting, characters are moved and behaved very realistic manner of cross sectional view, the dramatic structure and setting break the development of realistic characterization. When the need of the war was spoken, stylization and anti-realism emerged and gained prominence.

It is obvious that the play *Annai Idda Thee* demonstrates cross-sectional realistic characterization. However, the play adopts realism in theme and tone. The following statements clearly show the requirement of the realistic context: as Canagaratna (1997, p. 166) notes "This play could not help but be realistic if only for the reason that the ethnic war is being waged



here and now in Sri Lanka, not in the South Indian film studios. In such a context, stylization runs the risk of being thought frivolous”. Even though, its structure breaks conventional realistic form: multiple families appear in continuous performance of proscenium stage, the apron is used for street scenes and checkpoints, and actors shift their roles in mid-performance to enact other characters, especially during scenes of torture. The concept of the fourth wall is deliberately avoided; instead, the performance space is used as an interactive environment.

One of the events is presented in an indirect way, for instance, was the sound of firing from a helicopter, which is symbolically represented by a hymn of faith connected to religious culture that is rhythmic drumbeat and timed to the rounds of the gun. This hybrid style, which blends stylized aspects with real life, is a direct response to the psychological impacts of war instead of just an artistic experiment. However, as loss, death and trauma intensified, both aspects of realistic and anti-realistic theatre form (*Annai Idda Thee*) became partly necessary to convey lived reality. The emergence of the realistic play *Enthayum Thayum*, which is going to be analyzed in the next section, reflected the various psychological reality and truth related to war. In this analysis, the first play *Mansumantha Meniyar* presents characters as representations of the community, whereas *Annai Idda Thee* and *Enthayum Thayum* contradict this by focusing on the individual identity.

The Spread of War and the Emergence of Realistic Performance Conventions

The purpose of this play *Enthayum Thayum* diverges slightly from Shanmugalingam’s broader thematic intentions, as it was specifically written for those migrated by war and living abroad. As the playwright notes, *Enthayum Thayum* was written in 1992 at the request of several Jaffna Tamils residing in Canada. Consequently, the primary audience comprises the sons and daughters who migrated to foreign countries, leaving behind their parents and grandparents in the motherland (Shanmugalingam 2018, p. 10). In contrast to *Mann Sumandha Meniyar*, which overtly criticizes those who migrated, *Enthayum Thayum* approaches the experiences of migrants with empathy rather than judgment. Although the play centres on the emotional and social abandonment experienced by elderly parents left behind, it does not explicitly reproach those who migrated.⁵ Rather, it puts an emphasis on how many families depended on their kiths



Journal of Educare (JoE)
(A Peer Reviewed Bi-Annual Journal)

ISSN: 3048-9652 (Online)

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and kins in foreign countries for assistance and survival. However, from a critical point of view, the characters abroad might be seen as implicit antagonists in the narrative framework in the play even though they did not appear as character in the play.

The drama *Endhaiyum Thaayum* explores the civil war and its larger social effects that preceded it, and the era in which the play was written. It gives a critical description of the predominant socioeconomic conditions of the time by exposing topics including internal displacement, migration, economic hardship, communication difficulties, difficulties with transportation, and the effects of wartime brutality. The separation of elderly parents from their migrant children, an overall social reality of the era, is the primary subject of the play. Even if similar circumstances still exist today for some elderly people, even so contemporary communication gives distant care and contact possible. In contrast, handwritten letters via postal delivery were the only form of communication available during the war. Telephone was an expensive and difficult mode of communication then, frequently requiring travel to Colombo city, passing through military check points. Regular interaction with relatives overseas was practically impossible due to this limited entry. The line “Aiyathurai: You must go to the ICRC and inform the eldest son. He will notify the others” (Shanmugalingam 2008, p. 33), stressing lack of communication brought on by migration and conflict. A temporal shift is shown by Aiyathurai’s request to report to the ICRC ⁶, which exposes the inaction and communication obstacles of that era. *Endhaiyum Thaayum* displays Shanmugalingam’s roots in socio-political truth by mentioning the ICRC, thereby transitioning his plays from ideological narratives into historical evidence.

During this period, all transport and communication between northern and southern Sri Lanka were often disconnected. ⁷ Food, medicine, and letters to Vanni passed through strict military checkpoints, often via the Vavuniya detention camp, where items, especially medical supplies, were frequently confiscated. Shipments to Jaffna were sent by sea, with the *Kumari* and *Kumana* vessels transporting supplies and letters in 1992 (Shanmugalingam 2008, p. 22). Severe fuel shortages led to petrol being sold at 2800 rupees per litre, ⁸ (while bread cost only 5 rupees - for comparison), forcing vehicles to run on kerosene, emitting dense smoke



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ISSN: 3048-9652 (Online)

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(Shanmugalingam 2008, p. 28). In this play too, newspapers served as vital communication tools, especially for death announcements, as seen in Periyaiya's obituary (Shanmugalingam 2008, p. 34). Aerial attacks on civilians were intermittent, and the play's symbolic use of a military aircraft, imagined by Periyaiya as his son returning from abroad, but ultimately dropping no bombs, evokes the dementia of the character without shifting the play's thematic focus (Shanmugalingam 2008, p. 30).

While Tamil modern theatre traditionally leaned towards stylized or anti-realistic forms, characterized by metaphor, symbolism, and traditional *Kooththu* performance, *Enthayum Thayum* is predominantly written in a realistic style, marking a shift necessitated by the intensifying war and the resulting lived reality and truth. Moreover, communist ideology partly shapes war-themed plays like *Mansumantha Meniyar*, blending political awareness with social inequality. In *Enthayum Thayum*, which mainly employs a realistic style, anti-realist approaches also appear particularly when actors break away from their characters to create meta-theatrical moments that compromise realism. Stage directions - "(Acts as conversing on the telephone)" (Shanmugalingam, 2008, p. 27), in which actors transcend mimetic roles as performers to demonstrate the flashback. The character Selvaratnam interacts on the phone with his son and daughter, who are living overseas. This flashback scene is imitated in the present tense without interfering with the events in real time. Remarkably, other characters such as Vasanthi and Kannan act out the situation as migrated son and daughter by imitating the past telephone conversation, instead of those who initially got involved in the past incident in dramatic text. This method can be considered as an anti-realistic feature that deviates from the regulations of rigid realism and relates to the idea of doing or reporting.

Despite this, there is a noticeable departure from conventional realistic character embodiment while past events are represented through present movements. The actor becomes a performer who presents a part or role instead of being trapped within a psychologically unified character. Here, a particularly complicated dramaturgical device is utilized. The actor becomes a performer and the character becomes a role in plays that mimic social reality and have a non-linear structure. Based on Konijn, directors like Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook,



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(A Peer Reviewed Bi-Annual Journal)

ISSN: 3048-9652 (Online)

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Richard Schechner, and Eugenio Barba frequently substitute the terms actor and character with performer and role, focusing on the fluidity between stage performance and real-life behavior. This change reflects a blurring boundaries between theatrical roles and social identities (Konijn, 2000, p. 41). The simultaneous physical appearance of multiple families on stage during the performance is other anti-realistic feature of the play.⁹ The identical method may be employed to interrupt emotional continuity, which could be an alienation strategy, by applying stylized elements seen in previous dramatic traditions. At the end of the play adopts a hybrid theatrical framework, which includes some anti-realistic elements while promoting realism. On the contrary, in the following years, the realism once again evolved into anti-realism due to political situation.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the side effects and human consequences of war that resulted from ethnic conflict and militarization, are artistically represented in the dramatic texts of Kulanthai M. Shanmugalingam through the incorporation of collective memory, collective emotions, and collective trauma experienced by the Tamil community. These experiences are transformed into aesthetic theatrical expressions through dramaturgical techniques such as characterization, dialogue, stage directions, symbolism, songs, ritual elements, poetry, chorus, and fragmented episodic structures. Through these dramaturgical transformations, the plays establish a distinctive theatrical aesthetic capability to convey the realities of war, resistance and oppression. Shanmugalingam's dramatic texts also reveal the use of coded political language, which may be understood as an aesthetic adaptation developed under oppressive socio-political conditions. In this context, self-censorship functions simultaneously as symbolic dramaturgy and metaphorical resistance. A significant observation emerging from this study is that theatrical form and structure are shaped by external socio-political realities. The war-induced conditions of war and military surveillance determined whether linear or non-linear storytelling methods were appropriate. Consequently, the construction of dramatic form appears to have been based not only on artistic necessity but also on issues of safety, survival, and communicative urgency.



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During periods in which the war expanded and dominant powers attempted to consolidate public support for militarization, Shanmugalingam's plays sought to maintain immediate artistic communication with affected communities. Since the plays needed to express collective suffering in a generalized and accessible manner, his dramaturgy adopted modified and anti-realist theatrical forms. However, as the war intensified and its consequences became increasingly severe and individualized, the impacts of violence could no longer be represented solely through collective generalizations. At this stage, Shanmugalingam's later dramatic works gradually shifted toward the representation of individual experiences and personal crises, thereby incorporating partial realist modes of dramaturgy. This study therefore argues that changes in theatrical form were not determined merely by ideological transformations, but rather by the evolving intensity, expansion, and pressures of war itself, which generated new theatrical styles and performance languages. In Western theatre history, the emergence of realism and anti-realism was profoundly connected to the Industrial Revolution, scientific developments, and post-war philosophical thought. In contrast, the Sri Lankan Tamil theatrical context demonstrates that within the relatively short span of a thirty-year civil war, realist and anti-realist theatrical modes emerged primarily out of practical and socio-political necessity rather than through direct theoretical or ideological movements. Shanmugalingam's dramatic texts and performances provide evidence that aesthetic forms were developed as urgent artistic responses to war, trauma, and social communication. Although the ideological positions reflected in his plays sometimes differ or even contradict one another across different historical periods, these variations should be understood as reflections of the changing socio-political realities of each particular phase of the conflict. The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities forms the conditions shaped by ethnic conflict of Shanmugalingam's plays, which predominantly portray the anguish, trauma, and lived experiences of the Tamil community. However, these plays were also widely appreciated by Sinhala audiences, demonstrating their capacity to transcend ethnic boundaries and evoke broader human empathy. This universality is further evident in the translation of several of his plays into Sinhala and their performance for Sinhala audiences.



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Notably, when *Enthayum Thayum* was staged in Sinhala, the production generated a profound collective emotional response among Sinhala spectators, enabling audiences to empathetically engage with the suffering of another ethnic community beyond ethnic and political divisions.

Representing violent wartime experiences through theatrical performance for the very communities affected by those experiences raises important ethical and aesthetic questions. Nevertheless, this study finds that dramaturgical transformation played a crucial role in preventing audiences from being overwhelmed by direct traumatic representation. By incorporating local cultural practices, ritual traditions, and religious elements, these performances created a mediated aesthetic space that encouraged audiences not merely to relive suffering, but to understand social realities, express emotions, develop awareness, and engage in critical reflection. The practice and findings of this research further suggest that understanding artistic transformation and socio-political expression in dramatic writing is highly significant for contemporary playwrights and theatre practitioners. Within drama and theatre studies, script analysis, playwriting, literary interpretation, and socially engaged theatre remain essential components of the curriculum. In this regard, this study contributes substantially to the academic understanding of Sri Lankan Tamil theatre and provides a foundation for future research on dramatic texts and performances shaped by war and conflict. Moreover, the study offers valuable insights for artists, educators, and researchers seeking to critically examine socio-political history, cultural memory, and the role of theatre in shaping future social consciousness.

The research demonstrates that anti-realist theatre becomes particularly effective within highly restricted and politically sensitive social environments, where direct expression is constrained and multiple layers of meaning must be communicated indirectly. At the same time, the study also reveals that realist theatre gains greater relevance when the direct impacts of crisis and violence become intensely personal and socially overwhelming for affected communities. The findings additionally emphasize that, beyond fictional imagination alone, the artistic documentation of lived reality enables society to critically reflect upon both the past and the future. Such representations provide valuable insight not only for theatre practitioners



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ISSN: 3048-9652 (Online)

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and scholars, but also for broader socio-cultural understanding. Therefore, the study of Shanmugalingam's dramatic texts is significant not merely for understanding dramaturgical aesthetics and theatrical techniques, but also for recognizing how humanity confronts the challenges produced by crises such as war. His plays demonstrate how deeply localized experiences of suffering can simultaneously embody universal human concerns and emotions, ultimately transcending ethnic, political, and cultural boundaries to affirm the shared humanity at the core of collective trauma and resistance.

Foot note

1. *Maathorubhaagam*: A Half of Woman, Ardhanarishvara in Sanskrit—*Ardha* meaning half, *Nari* meaning woman, and *Ishvara* meaning Shiva *Mathorupaham* “The Lord Who is Half Woman”. In this work, Shanmugalingam introduces, for the first time, the destructive aspects of ethnic conflict
2. The English translation of the play directly conveys the term helicopter, whereas in the original Tamil version, it carries a symbolic meaning in cultural context.
3. Although many characters in the play exhibit psychological trauma in various forms, this paper focuses exclusively on the character of Gauri as a representative case, omitting others due to constraints of length.
4. Fuel shortages forced civilians to travel predominantly by bicycle. Shanmugalingam displays an acute awareness of the extraordinary wartime conditions and how they infiltrated everyday life.
5. The Sinhala translated version of the play (*Hiru Naegenthura*) was staged at Punchi theatre in Colombo in 2018, where same reflections and sympathies were observed among Sinhala audience.
6. The period during which, ICRC played a significant role in providing humanitarian assistance: transporting the wounded and sick across military-controlled zones for medical treatment, distributing essential relief materials, transmitting urgent communications such as death notices to Colombo and foreign countries, facilitating letter exchanges to and from conflict zones, and locating separated family members.



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7. For those traveling from Jaffna to Colombo via Vavuniya, the journey entailed passing through LTTE-controlled areas such as Poonakari*, Kilali*, Urian kaadu*, and Kompadi* or alternatively, traveling by sea.
8. The playwright composed *Annai Itta Thee* and *Enthaiyum Thayum* at home under light of energy saving Kerosene lamp (*Kuppi vilakku/Sikkana vilakku*). Due to the unavailability of electricity, people relied on bicycle dynamos to power radios for news, manually pedaling to generate current. With kerosene bans in effect, improvised lamps were created using jam bottles, minimal kerosene, and salt.
9. The play at first staged in a courtyard house, featuring three families in a joint family setup that created a highly realistic environment. At the same time, it avoided the anti-realistic technique of breaking the fourth wall commonly found in proscenium theatre.

*** Names of the villages in Jaffna**

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