

AKAM AND PURAM POETRY IN CILAPATTIKARAM

Introduction: An important feature of Sangam literature is the use of the poetic form. According to the ancient Tamil treatise, *Tholkappiyam*, poetry's subject matter is categorised under two heads: *Akam* and *Puram*. These two are mutually related in terms of being the opposite of the other and simultaneously complementing each other.

Akam stands for the interior, the individual, the feminine, and the varied phases of love. Women dominate the *Akam*. *Puram* stands for the exterior, the world, the masculine, violence and heroism. It is male-dominated.

Kamil Veith Zvelebil describes the two forms in the given words:

“in the early classical poems, which have been termed hedonistic and egalitarian in spirit, whose length varies from three to over eight hundred lines, and which often go under the now ‘popular’ term Sangam poetry, the religious inspiration and the philosophical reflection are almost totally absent. These were poems of ‘sentiments’ and of ‘exploits’ of the noumenon’ and the ‘phenomenon’, in Tamil terminology, of *Akam* and *Puram*; in a somewhat simplified manner we may also say, poems of a total human erotic experience, and of heroism and public activity.”

The contents of *Akam* and *Puram* are poetry is located in terms of *mutal* – the first themes which are place and time, of *karu* – the seed theme that indicated the relationship between human beings and the world, society at large and *uri* – the essential theme that reflects the various phases of love and war. The *mutal* is further divided into *Thinai*s. They are seven in number in both *Akam* and *Puram*.

Five *Akam thinai*s, also called as *Aintinai*, are named after flora and fauna. In *Akam*, the *Aintinai*s are: *Kurinchi*, *Mullai*, *Marutam*, *Neytal* and *Palai*. The other two *Akam thinai*s, *Kaikkilai* (unrequited love) and *Perunthinai* (mismatched love or lust), are considered as inappropriate subjects for poetry. Similarly, in *Puram*, six out of the seven *thinai*s are named after flowers/trees and indicate military situations. S. Murali points out that the categorisation of the environment into the *thinai*s should be seen as “the earliest attempt by the Sangam poets towards the formulation of an environmental aesthetics, where the human *bhava* seeks its correspondence in the natural *vibhava*.”

Commenting upon the use of natural landscape in *Akam* poetry, Xavier S. Thani Nayagam states that:

Akam poetry had to consider as its essential theme one of the five aspects of love poetry, choose an appropriate situation and write with the prescribed landscape, the annual season and the period of the day pertinent to the division. The poet had to be particular about choosing similes and metaphors from objects exclusive to the region. The objects were: the gods, food, fauna, flora, music and other objects indigenous to the region. By way of exception, the flora or birds or any of the other objects of one region might not be mentioned in a poem of another region for even nature is not rigorous in her natural divisions to be so exclusive. This mixing of regional objects was permitted and was known as “regional interchange”.

Puram poems through are easier as their themes are foregrounded in the objective.

The *Akam* and *Puram thinai*s along with their corresponding landscapes are listed below:

Landscape	Akam			Puram		
	<i>Thinai</i>	Flowers/trees	Phases in Love	<i>Thinai</i>	Flower/tree	Military Situation
Hills	<i>Kurinci</i>	Conehead	Clandestine meeting of lovers	<i>Vetki</i>	Scarlet ixora	Cattle raiding
Pastureland and open terraces	<i>Mullai</i>	Jasmine	Waiting in hope	<i>Vanci</i>	Indian willow	Invasion
Riverine-agrarian	<i>Marutam</i>	Arjuna tree	Wife's sulking/ infidelity of man	<i>Ulinai</i>	Balloon vine	Siege
Littoral	<i>Neytal</i>	Dark lily	Lamenting/ anxiety for husband's return	<i>Tumpai</i>	White dead nettle	Pitched battle
Uncultivated Dry Region	<i>Palai</i>	Ivory wood	Parting/ lover's departure in search of wealth or knowledge	<i>Vakai</i>	Sirissa tree	Victory
	<i>Kaikkilai</i>		Unrequited love	<i>Kanci</i>	Portia tree	Impermanence of life
	<i>Perunthinai</i>		Mismatched love/ lust	<i>Patan</i>	Not specified	Praise of kings

The *thinai* concept has social and historical significance. According to P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar, the concept of *thinai* illustrates the evolution of civilization: "All these five kinds of natural regions are found in the Tamil country, though on a small scale and as the South Indian spread from region to region he developed the stages of culture which each region was calculated to produce." According to him, the *thinai* concept reveals the spread of Tamils from the hills and mountains to the low-lying plains." Ramachandra Dikshithar saw the *thinai* concept as a clue to the pre-history of South India. A.K. Ramanujam says that the "actual objective of landscapes of Tamil country became the interior landscapes of Tamil poetry." He also states that the "real world was always kept in sight and included in the symbolic."

Akam and *Puram* domains encapsulate varied human experiences in historical time and place. *Akam* poems depict various phases of and situations in love. Women's voices are predominantly heard though they remain anonymous. In fact, in *Akam* poetry, speakers are identified by their relationship. No proper names are mentioned. One witnesses the girl, her friend, mother, foster mother, the lover, the husband, the concubine, the wife addressing each other or speaking within earshot of the other. The poems are short, pithy, moving dramatic monologues that manage to pierce through the listener's and reader's heart.

In the *Puram* domain, it is the men – the king, the soldiers – who dominate and the women are only thankful that they are their mothers or wives. The heroes are referred to by their names, identities

are revealed and celebrated. Apart from their battle wounds, kings are hailed for their charity, munificence and generous patronage of court poets in *Puram* poetry. There are *Puram* poems that stress upon the transience of life, impermanence of earthly glory and the levelling of the king and the commoner.

Akam and Puram in Cilapattikaram: *Cilapattikaram* uses the unique non-Sanskritic poetic sequence that incorporates *Iyal* (poetry), *Isai* (music) and *Natakam* (dance) and is interspersed with prose sections. The epic in Tamil consists of 5730 lines in *akaval* meter and is said to have been composed around fifth century C.E. The text also uses *kali* and *venpa* meters. The prose pieces are considered to be one of the earliest in Tamil poetry.

The “Book of Pukar” which has 10 cantos and is situated in Pukar in the Chola kingdom. Since the Book is about the conjugal life of Kannaki-Kovalan and the love affair of Matavi-Kovalan, *Akam* form of poetry is used. The *Neytal thinai* is invoked in cantos 6 and 7. It is here that the misunderstanding between Matavi and Kovalan occur. *Palai thinai* is used in canto 10, where the bankrupt and repentant Kovalan and his wife Kannaki leave Pukar without informing their parents.

The two women, Kannaki and Matavi, in this book depict their moral ethics through *Akam* poetry. Kannaki owing to her fidelity, patience and chastity depicts the supreme value of *karpu*. Meanwhile, Matavi is also presented in a positive light as a chaste woman, though not equal to Kannaki.

The “Book of Maturai” focuses on Kannaki and Kovalan’s journey to Maturai and their quest for their *karma*. *Puram* is invoked when Kannaki enters the court of the Pantiya king after the execution of her husband on the false accusation of theft. She proves her husband’s innocence in the open court. Kannaki with simmering eyes and dishevelled hair, holding her anklet is compared to Kali:

Pent up with hatred and anger

At the loss of her husband, she stands at the gate, a golden anklet in her hand.”

The king dies of guilt. The queen dies of shock at the loss of her husband. Kannaki curses the entire city of Maturai. She wrenches off her left breast and flings it on the city of Maturai. She addresses Agni, the god of fire:

“Brahmans, good men, cows, chaste women, / the old and children – spare these. Go

after the wicked.”

Kannaki’s chastity becomes her power. According to B. Mangalam; “Silenced and controlled by patriarchal institutions, Kannagi unleashes her sexual energy into a powerful tool of interrogation and subsequent annihilation of the unjust, the adharma, the untruth.”

She transgresses into the public domain. This transgression is depicted through the use of *Puram* poetry. She was the forgiving wife in the “Book of Pukar”. She accepts her disloyal husband back and helps him by giving up her anklets. However, in the “Book of Maturai”, she is vengeful and punishing. Therefore, Kannaki, who in the “Book of Pukar” is depicted through *Akam* is now in the *Puram* domain. B. Mangalam says that; “Kannagi, the silent, chaste wife, cloistered within the *Akam* domain, now invades the public/ *Puram* domain and challenges the king and proves in the open court that her husband was not a thief.”

It is in the “Book of Maturai” that Kannaki’s apotheosis into a deity begins. She is a middle class woman in the first book. In the second, she is promised to be made into an immortal. This transition is depicted through her movement into *Puram* domain from the *Akam*. The apotheosis is complete in the “Book of Vanci”. This book shows the synthesis of the private/ *Akam* and the public/ *Puram* domains. B. Mangalam states that “Kannagi’s traversing from *Akam* to *Puram* is a fascinating journey.” It is here that the silent chaste wife of the “Book of Pukar” is silenced again through her deification in the “Book of Vanci”.

The “Book of Vanci” begins in the *Akam* tradition. Canto 24, “The Round Dance of the Hill Dwellers”, has short lyrics in the *Kurinchi thinai*. Spoken by ‘she’ and her woman friend – “her friend speaks to her”/ “she speaks to her friend” – with ‘He’ sometimes within earshot. The lyrics are about the woman’s relationship with her beloved, “the man from the high mountain”. This canto reflects the various phases of love.

The friend of the woman in love encourages her to bathe in the waterfall:

We will bathe in the mountain waterfall

That sparkles and flows, bright as Indra’s bow,

A blend of powders: the kohl, musk and sindura. (2)

The woman in love tells her friend that because of her strange behaviour, the villagers doubt that she is possessed by spirit:

The village gossip thinks I am possessed by Katampan.

She has called the shaman to perform dance

To rid me of this illness caused by the man

From the cool mountain on which peppercorns grow. (11)

As the two women speak, the man is within earshot:

Our man from the mountain with a fragrant garland

Hid himself and was all ears as we sang. (19)

The woman expresses her fear of separation to her lover:

The people

Of the small huts, being foolish, will not accept you

As the god wreathed in a cadamba garland. (20)

The friend assures the woman that there will be a successful culmination of her love: "It seems the man from the mountain will marry you." (21)

Canto 24 and these poems in the *Kurinchi thinai* end with prayers to the newly transformed Pattini Kannaki for the fruition of their love:

We will sing a song in honor of the chaste woman

Who burned down the glorious city of Maturai

With her breast. (21)

The women do the Kuravai dance, usually dedicated to Lord Murugan and Valli, while singing in praise of Kannaki. They also pay respect to their king, Cenkuttuvan:

In the same way, our lover will come to this place

While we sing our songs and perform

The round dance. May the king of the west country

Who ruled over the Kolli hills

And inscribed his bow-emblem on the Himalaya

Live in endless joy in the days to come. (26)

Kannaki as the symbol of chastity and fidelity is the right one to seek blessings from for the success of the affair. These *Akam* poems indicate the merging of the Murugan cult with the newly anointed cult of Kannaki. Reference to Kannaki and Cenkuttuvan by the lovers foreshadow the synthesis of the virtues of chastity and kingship which occurs in the last canto of the "Book of Vanci".

Canto 25, "The Choice of the Stone" delves into the heroic/ masculine domain as the narrative shifts from Kannaki and the hill dwellers to King Cenkuttuvan. *Puram* genre is now invoked. The king learns about Kannaki from the hill dwellers and the poet Cattan. He decides to build a temple for her and thereby, officially declare her as the *Pattini*. It is from canto 25 onwards, that the narrative becomes more about Cenkuttuvan than Kannaki. Kannaki becomes the silent deity while Cenkuttuvan, the symbol of patriarchal authority, institutionalises her and also legitimised his authority as a king.

Canto 25 begins with the *Puram thinai*, i.e, *Vanci*. *Vanci thinai* describes the preparation for war. Here, King Cenkuttuvan's chivalry during war is described. He is compared to Lord Indra:

Followed by a train of women

Pressing along the route, he left the environs of Vanci,

Appeared like Indra of the fierce spear....(10-12)

Further,

He mounted his great elephant,

And his train wound to a distance

Of twelve hundred and sixty miles (15-17)

Also,

After setting fire to the enemy's camp, The imperishable fame achieved by feeding

His soldiers, and the prowess of a king on the eve of battle.

He ordered his troops to put on their battledress

And wreaths of unbroken palm leaves.... (150-154)

The *Vanci thinai* is accompanied with the *Korravanci thurai* (theme), here. The function of the *Korravanci thurai* is to praise the king who destroys his enemy valiantly in the battlefield. Lines 157 to 173 of Canto 25 are in the *Korravanci thurai*. For example,

Villavan Kotai,

His minister, the said:

"May your upright rule

Last for many years! On the bloodstained field

Of Konkan you routed your equals

Who forfeited their banners with the emblems of the tiger

and the fish. (159-162)

Another example,

We cannot forget

Your courage when you escorted your mother

To bathe in the swollen Ganga, and fought alone

Against a thousand Aryas that the cruel god

Of death was stunned. (167-171)

This canto also refers to *Vallai* song: “the vallai song of those who pounded grain”. These are songs in praise of a heroic figure and are sung by women while working in the fields, winnowing or gathering grains.

Canto 26, “Removing the Stone” uses the *Tumpai thinai*. This *thinai* is used for the description of the battle. The king engages in a violent battle with the Arya kings of the North. The descriptions are that of gore and are blood-curdling:

With gleaming tusks, and by swift horsemen,
Smothered the battlefield, blinded people,
Made hoarse the throats of bells suspended
From the necks of war elephants, and chocked
The far-sounding conches of the standard bearers,
And stopped them from adding to the terror. (210-215)

As the king destroys his enemies, he is described as a famished lion. Such descriptions are typical of the *Tumpai thinai*:

As a famished lion
Stalking for prey rejoices at the sight
Of a herd of elephants, so did Cenkuttuvan rejoice
Seeing his foes march towards him. Weathers
In a garland of Portia, he hurled his troops
Against the enemy. (193-198)
His wrath and thirst for blood makes him equivalent to the god of death:
On his head he now wore a wreath of white
Dead nettle, braided with palm leaves,
And appeared on the battlefield to the Arya king
Like the god of death himself, riding a buffalo
And devouring all the lives in a span of a day. (230-234)

The descriptions get gorier as the goblins begin to celebrate the violence and feast on the dead bodies of both the camps:

With crowned heads for an oven,
Broken heads for pans, shoulder blades for ladles,

The goblin chef fed all the goblins. Smacking

Their lips, they gave thanks:

“May the king

Of the upright sceptre who fought and won

This just battle live forever.” (259-263)

The description of the victory of the Chera king is also described in terms of gore. Such a portrayal becomes significant because it subtly goes on to question the effectiveness of war. The Chera king may be victorious but the celebration by the goblins makes this victory a damp affair. Illango Atikal, as a Jaina ascetic, therefore, questions the need for such violence in order to defend Dharma. Or rather, he forces us to question whether it is legitimate to camouflage the violent imperialist tendencies with the cause of Dharma. This is done through the *Puram* form. B. Mangalam states that; “Even as Illango follows the *Puram* literary conventions, his message of non-violence and renunciation of evil gets reiterated in each of the three books of the epic through the Jaina precepts that lie at the core of the poem.”

Canto 27 titled as “The Lustration”, sums up the preceding narrative and simultaneously pushes the plot forward. It, therefore, moves both in the *Akam* and the *Puram* domains.

The queen of Vanci learns that the king is on his way back from the war. She begins to make preparations for his welcome. These descriptions are through *Kurinchi thinai* in the *Akam* domain:

A flowery canopy topped the golden harem.

Made by expert hands, it was decorated

With strings of pearls and flowers, and blazed

With the glitter of diamonds and gems fastened

By gold thread. (217-221)

The king and the queen will be re-united again. The queen dresses up to welcome him with the help of her maids:

Renounce your sorrow at the parting

Of your dear lord.

The dwarfs and hunchbacks

Came up to her and said:

Let beauty reappear.

The noble lord is come. Brighten up

Your fragrant hair with everyday ornaments. (227-232)

This canto also re-narrates the story of Kannaki. Matalan informs the king about Kannaki, Kovalan and Matavi. These descriptions of their domestic lives, describing various phases of love, delve in the *Akam*:

The girl Matavi

Had a lover's quarrel with Kovalan as they amused

Themselves in the cool seashore. Inspired by fate,

She sang the songs of the seaside grove

To accompany her dance. Instead of reuniting them,

The songs made them drift apart. (64-69)

The news Kovalan and Kannaki's death, leads to the death of Kavunti, Kannaki's mother and Kovalan's mother:

And she (Kavunti) moaned: 'Was this the fate of those

Who were my companions?' She vowed to starve

Herself to death. So ended her life. (95-97)

Kovalan's mother gives up her life:

His wife too, reeling from the shock

Of her son's terrible death, gave up her life. (110-111)

The others, Kovalan's father and Kannaki's father, give up their wealth:

When Kovalan's father heard of what had become

Of his son and daughter-in-law and also of the just king

Of Maturai, he was distraught. He gave away

All his wealth and entered the sevenfold monastery

of Indra. (103-107)

Matavi and her daughter Manimekalai renounced their material life and enter the Jaina monastery:

"I must now lead a virtuous life.

Manimekalai should be spared the life of a courtesan

Which is full of troubles."

Her hair, wreathed in flowers,

She removed, and entered a Buddhist nunnery (117-120)

Reference to death continues in *Puram* poems also. The Pantiya King offers the sacrifice of one thousand goldsmiths to Pattini to absolve the kingdom of the sin done by the goldsmith who had falsely implicated Kovalan:

O Poraiyan! A wreath of palm leaves

You wore to celebrate the success of your sword,

Brandished in your right hand, in tearing apart

The margosa tree guarded by the Palaiyan.

Be gracious enough to listen to me.

The victorious Ver-Celiyan, ruler of Korkai,

Offered a sacrifice of one thousand goldsmiths

In a single day to the goddess Pattini

Who had wrenched off one of her breasts. (137-145)

Through the references to death in both the *Akam* and the *Puram* domains, the author seems to underscore the Jaina precepts of renunciation and transience of life.

Canto 27 also describes the valour and the righteousness of the Chera king through the *Puram* domain:

O King

Of the vast world, may you live forever!

In a day you broke the nine parasols

Of nine kings who had formed a league

Against your cousin, Killivalavan. (129-133)

Canto 28, "The Dedication of the Memorial Stone" adheres to the *Kanchi thinai* of the *Puram* genre. Matalan counsels the king about the uncertainty of life and asks him to conduct sacrifices and other rituals for spiritual power:

O just king! It is unnecessary to remind men

Of wisdom that youth will not last forever. O guardian king!

Lakshmi resides in your chest through you see

Your body covered with grey hair. Souls

In divine bodies are often reborn in human bodies,

And souls in human bodies may be reborn
In animals. (159-165)

And,

The king of the loud anklets, invited
Sacrificail priests, instructed by teachers
Expert in the four Vedas. They were asked
To begin the festival of rites as advised
By Matalan.

He ordered the Arya kings
Removed from prison and taken outside the city
Of vanci of great renown to Velavikko Palace,
Enclosed by ponds and cool groves. (192-196)

It is in canto 28 that the synthesis of Kannaki as a Pattini and King cenkuttuvan begins. The virtues of Chastity (*Karpu*) and Kingship merge.

The virtue of women is useless if the king
Rules unjustly. She made the Cola realize it.
She made the Pantiyan, lord of the south
Realize, "The king cannot survive if his sceptre
Is crooked." She made the Ceral,
Lord of the west, realize, "The wrath
Of kings will not be appeased till their vows
Are fulfilled and made known to the kings
Of the north." (212-213)

This synthesis is well depicted through the alternation between *Akam and Puram*. The synthesis, however, leads to the absorption of Kannaki into the patriarchal domain of King Cenkuttuvan. She is deified by Cenkuttuvan and she in turn goes on to legitimise the rule of king Cenkuttuvan as ideal. B. Mangalam states that "The cult of Pattini is thus institutionalised. Her worship is ritualised and authorised by the king's decree. While the king is eager to partake of Pattini's sacred power, her deification is legitimised by the King's authority. The symbiotic power assumes awe and power in the eyes of the subjects and other kings alike."

Canto 29 titled as “Benediction” contains both prose and poetry section. The Preface is a prose piece which summarises the past happenings of the text. The poetry section is in the *Akam* form. They are in the form of lamentations by the relatives of Kannaki – Tevanti, the foster mother and close friend. Cenkuttuvan, Kannaki and girls of Vanci also speak. The close friend and the foster mother remain anonymous. Their words are a reminder to the readers about the virtues of chastity, perseverance and justice – the ideals the Pattini goes on to symbolise and the Jaina value of renunciation.

The poetic section begins with an introduction of the speakers – Tevanti, Foster Mother and the Close Friend. They all introduce themselves as a relative of Kannaki. Tevanti says: “Know me as the friend of the woman of the Cola country” (2). The Foster Mother says: “Know me as the foster mother of the woman of cool Pukar” (3). The close friend says; “But followed her husband as a dutiful wife./ Know me as the friend of the woman of Pumpukar” (4). They also go on to inform about the fate of some of the close relatives of Kannaki and Kovalan.

Tevanti while lamenting before the image of Kannaki says:

The day your mother

heard of the troubles your torn-off breast had caused,

O woman with beautiful locks of hair,

She died of grief...

Your mother-in-law too died? (5)

The Foster Mother says:

Macattuvan heard of the evil done to Kovalan

By the wretched man, and of the death

Of the guardian king. He lost heart

And wished he were dead. He gave away

His wealth and renounced the world. (6)

The Close Friend introduces Manimekalai:

Matavi...went to the sages

That live under the bo tree, gave away her wealth,

And entered a nunnery...

And did you also hear, friend,

Of the renunciation of Manimekalai? (7)

Cenkuttuvan's words are a description of the vision that he has of the Goddess:

Of a lightning figure with gold anklets,

A girdle, bangles round her arms, earrings

And other ornaments of pure gold. (9)

Kannaki appears next and her words are a reiteration of her assimilation into the patriarchy. The Pantiya king, whose authority she had challenged and subverted in the "Book of Maturai", is now forgiven by the Pattini. Their relationship is that of a father and a daughter.

Blameless is the Pantiyan, now an honoured guest

In the palace of the king of the gods.

I am his daughter. I am going to play

On Venvelan's hill. (10)

The Girls of Vanci sing in praise of Pattini. They sing in praise of the "Tennavan's daughter" (11) and also praise the Chera dynasty: "We shall praise Vanavan./ Let the gods praise the king of the Vaiyai"(12). The Pantiya king is also blessed and thereby absolved of his sin of being unjust: "Let us praise the king who gave up his life/ Burned by the tears of the woman/ Who suffered the outcome of past fate" (13)

These stanzas are followed by the Song of the Wooden Ball (16-19), the Song of the Ball (20-22), the Song of the Swing (23-25), the Song of the Pestle (26-28). These songs are a celebration of the political power of the Tamil empire. The Chola, Chera and Pantiya dynasties are praised in these songs.

The final stanza of the Canto is synthesis of the sacred power of Kannaki and the imperial power of Cenkuttuvan.

Canto 30 is titled as "The Granting of a Favor" completed the deification of the Kanniki. Cenkuttuvan institutionalises Kannaki as Pattini. The canto describes the value of renunciation, through the example set by Manimekalai. The *Puram thinai Kanchi* is used here.

She then told him of Manimekalai's great

Renunciation. (8-9)

Illango Atikal's renunciation is also narrated here by Tevantikai:

In the elegant audience hall

Of the ancient city of Vanci, you were seated

Beside your father. When the astrologer presided

You would inherit the throne, you disapproved of him

To relieve the pain of Cenkuttuvan (169-174)

The *Kanchi thinai* is also used to talk about the prevailing beliefs in the cycle of birth and death as well as in the organic, casual principle of Karma:

Good and bad

Actions have their own reward. Those who are born

Die, and those who die are reborn. Old truths, these. (134-136)

The canto seems to bind the *Akam* and *Puram* together. It ends with instructions for men and women which hold good in both the public and the private worlds: "Do not hurt any living thing./ be charitable and do penance...Do not give false evidence...Uphold domestic virtues...Youth, wealth and the body/ Are unstable...Few are the days of your fate...." (185-198)

It thereby, goes on to complete the synthesis of the sacred power and the imperial power, the Kannaki and Cenkuttuvan, the feminine and the masculine.

Conclusion: The use of the *Akam* and *Puram* forms is strategic in *Cilapattikaram*. It helps in exemplifying the main theme of the epic – the signification of *Karpu* and the ideals of kingship.

