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### Wit and Humour in the *Akam* Poems of Tamil *Cankam* Literature

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#### Abstract

Literature of the *Cankam* (Sangam) period which roughly dates back two millennia is oriented towards nature. It speaks of a growing civilization on the banks of rivers and mountains with pristine and lush in their beauty. The distinctive feature of *Cankam* poetry deals with the ecosystem which is an integral part of the lives of the people of the ancient Tamil society. Celebration of the river *Vaiyai* in the eleven songs of the *Paripatal* illustrates the extraordinary relationship that exists between nature and the natives of the Tamil land. *Paripatal* is a class by itself which has fifteen poems on Tirumaal and Murukan as devotional hymns and the remaining nine on the river *Vaiyai* flowing through Maturai, which can be classified as *Akam* poetry.

The festivities that mark the *pudhupunal* or freshes of the river *Vaiyai* is a celebration of camaraderie, friendship, pomp and pageant interspersed with wit and humour. Nature had been a veritable source of inspiration to most of the poets. Rivers had always been centers of civilization which drew the attention of ancient bards. The *Vaiyai* (also known as *Vaigai*) river became the proud symbol of Madurai City, its ruler and almost all the poets who have written about it have graphically described the coming of the freshes in the river after the heavy rains in the Western mountains.

The *Vaiyai* poems in the *Paripatal* illustrate the prosperity of the Pandiya Kingdom and also the full-blooded and vigorous love life of the young men and women of the day. They may be classified under the *akam* or poems of the interior domain as most of them portray the wife sulking on hearing about her husband sporting on the river bank with his concubine whereupon the husband coaxes his wife in various ways. The *Vaigaifreshes* festivity interwoven with humour. Is discussed in this paper along with other *Akam* poems.

**Keywords :** Sangam Literature, *Akam* Poems, Wit and humour, River *Vaigai/Vaiyai*, festivities

#### Tamil *Cankam* Literature

This paper is broadly based on Tamil *Cankam* literature which dates back to many centuries before the Christian era. This literature showcases the rich Tamil tradition and culture through the various collection of poems written during this period. The poems are broadly divided into *akam* and *puram*, meaning the inner(private) and outer(public) land/mindscapes. It speaks of a growing civilization on the banks of rivers and mountains with pristine and lush in their beauty. The distinctive feature of *Cankam* poetry deals with the ecosystem which is an integral part of the lives of the people of the ancient Tamil society.

*Cankam* poetry written in classical Tamil is divided into Eighteen Greater Anthologies and

Eighteen Lesser Anthologies. The former is made up of two parts, the *Ettutokai* (Eight Anthologies) and *Pattuppaattu* (Ten Longer Idylls). The Eight anthologies consist of eight separate collections of poems of different lengths collected together in different poets, often with the patronage of Kings and Chieftains. They are *Akanaanurru*, *Ainkurunuru*, *Narrinai*, *Kalittokai*, *Kuruntokai*, *Patirrupattu*, *Puranaanuru* and *Paripatal*. The first five deal with the *Akam*/interior landscape, which has love themes. The next two deal with *Puram*/exterior domain which deals with war. *Paripatal* is a class by itself which has fifteen poems on Tirumaal and Murukan as devotional hymns and the remaining nine on the river *Vaiyai* flowing through Maturai, which can be classified as *Akam* poetry.



### **Tolkappiyam's perspective on Wit and Humour**

This study will focus on the *akampoems* and the wit and humour associated with it. The situations and contexts that calls for wit and humour in Tamil literature is classified by the magnum opus of Tamil grammatical, linguistic and poetic discourse manual known as *Tolkappiyam*.

According to linguist and lexicographer V.Murugan "Tolkappiyama comprehensive treatise of linguistics and poetics in Tamil, written by Tolkappiar, dates back to atleast a few centuries before the dawn of the Christian era" (Intro. ix). Tolkappiyam is divided into three broad sections,

1. *Eluttatikaram* which deals with the system of the Tamil alphabets.
2. *Collatikaram* is basically about Tamil words, morphology and syntax.
3. "The third section, *Porulatikaram* treats of the materials and structuring of *Akam* and *Puram* literatures, the science of creativity, theories of literature, theory of emotions, prosody, imagery, rhetoric, sociology and psychology of literature. (Intro. x)

This tour de force goes beyond being a mere guide of rules and regulations; instead, it is situated against the backdrop of life itself. Its extensive and insightful analysis is intricately woven into the fabric of the human experience and the natural world. The third section serves as a critical tool to analyse *the akam* literature. The guidelines outlined encompass a range of scenarios, delving into the natural landscapes of personal experiences and the emotions entwined in navigating clandestine love affairs, marriages, familial bonds, the separation of protagonists, and the hero's illicit relationships with prostitutes, among other contexts. The behavioural pattern of the protagonists, their confidante or friends, the foster mother or nurse of the heroine and every other character is defined in this section.

The context of wit and humour, the person who is appropriate to express them and the pattern of expression is also specified. In the *Porullyal* (meaning Residual Aspects) Chapter of *Tolkaapiyam* (under Section 3 *Porulatikaram*) the author discusses about the Confidante's Ruling Trait poem no. 1181.

*Urukannompal tan iyalpuaakalin  
uriyataakum, thozhikannurane*

Wit is verily the forte of the heroine's confidante,  
charged with guarding against  
The impediments to the lovers' union  
That she is. (Murugan 508)

While commenting about Poem no. 1184 *Ullurai* meaning a suggestive device it is said that there are fivefold implication, meaning, ways to express this. Among them *nakai* meaning wit and humour is a device.

*Utanuraiuvamamcuttu, nakai, cirappu, enak  
Ketal arumarapinullurainte.*

The suggestive device *ullurai*

Representing a tradition of unbroken note  
Has a fivefold ramification:

That which is co-existent (*utanurai*) 1

Correlation between the tenor and vehicle (*uvamum*) 2

One signifier pointing to the other (*cuttu*) 3

Signification disguised in wit and humour (*nakai*) 4

And a unique event in nature implying a human signification (*cirappu*) 5

(Murugan 509)

The suggestive wit and humour is explained by V.Murugan through *Akananuru* poem no.56 (*Akam Poem*)

O Confidante!

I was amused . . .

The minstrel on a mission to bring a new woman

To the lord of cool waters

Was frightened by a charging cow,

The mother of a new-born calf,

Threw his lyre down

Came running and sought refuge in my house.

Concealing my laughter

I went before him and said

'This is not the house you are after'.

The apparent derision of the heroine conceals her grief at the unworthy act of the minstrel in aiding the debauchery of her husband. (Murugan 510 & 511)

Further in the *Meippattulyal* (meaning Manifest Emotions) Chapter of *Tolkaapiyam* (under Section 3 *Porulatikaram*) the author discusses about the eight kinds of emotions in poem no. 1193 – Principal Emotions as treated in Poetry,

These eight kinds of manifest emotions are  
Laughter, grief, disgust, wonder,  
Fear, pride, anger and joy. (Murugan 516)

In poem no.1194 while tracing the Sources of Principal Emotions

The four sources of laughter are  
Ridicule, childishness, stupidity and credulity.  
(Murugan 516)

Most of the situations in *Akam* poems occur in situations of love affair and extra-marital affairs. The women characters and their approach to situations mostly involving the hero and his clandestine/extra-marital affair evokes wit and humour. This is demonstrated through various poems where the women whether the confidante or the heroine herself or even the concubine never spares to ridicule the stupidity and credulity of the hero.

Another example is from Poem no. 51 – *Kurinci* (selection from *Kalittokai*). The translation used here is by S.M. Ponnaiah. This poem is by the famous poet Kapilar which is an example of a witty situation that emerges through a love scene. The hero and the heroine meet unexpectedly in the early phase of their love affair. The mischievous hero seized the heroine's braceleted fore-arm and pressed it when she came there to give him water to drink. She cried out asking her mother to come and witness the roguish behavior of the hero. When her mother rushed alarmed by her daughter's scream, all at once the heroine unexposed his action and told her mother "He had a hiccough while drinking water". The witty situation further extends when,

Thereupon mother stroked his back gently  
To assuage his choking sensations, the while  
He looked at me from the corners of his eyes  
As if killing me and gave me (through looks)

A pleasurable union – that charming thief! (Hikosaka and John Samuel 248-249)

*Vaiyai* (River Vaigai) as the Representative Symbol of the Ancient Tamil Society

Celebration of the river *Vaiyai* in the eleven songs of the *Paripatal* illustrates the extraordinary relationship that exists between nature and the natives of the Tamil land. Nature had been a veritable source of inspiration to most of the poets. Rivers had always been centers of civilization which drew the attention of ancient bards.

The *Vaiyai* (also known as Vaigai) river became the proud symbol of Madurai City, its ruler and almost all the poets who have written about it have graphically described the coming of the freshes in the river after the heavy rains in the Western mountains. (The freshes are known as *PudhuPunal* in Tamil.)

The *Vaiyai* poems in the *Paripatal* illustrate the prosperity of the Pandiya Kingdom and also the full-blooded and vigorous love life of the young men and women of the day. They may be classified under the *akam* or poems of the interior domain as most of them portray the wife sulking on hearing about her husband sporting on the river bank with his concubine whereupon the husband coaxes his wife in various ways. These situations lead to wit and humour. This demonstrates that the ancient Tamil society remained unflustered by the restrictions of morality. Prostitution as an institution was openly acknowledged and not even explicitly frowned upon by the people.

The great Tamil Epic *Silappathikaaram* ascertains this fact where the disloyal Kovalan abandons his virtuous wife Kannagi and flirts with Madhavi a prostitute. When Kovalan returns back to Kannagi, the Pandiya King wrongly convicts him of robbery leading to the unfair execution of Kovalan. The infuriated Kannagi burns the whole of Madurai with fire raging from her eyes being a chaste woman. The epic stands testimony to the licentious and lustful life styles of that period.

The *Paripatal* songs on *Vaiyai* also depict the socio-cultural contours of ancient Tamil society. (The *Paripatal* songs in English quoted in this study are the translation done by Prof.K.G.Seshadri.)

**The river becomes a representational symbol as follows:**

1. Focuses on Love, sulking of women and the passionate lives of men and their concubines whose activities are similar to the rumbustious freshes of the *Vaiyai*.
2. Considers the river as a sacred waterscape eulogizing the *Vaiyai* Goddess to shower prosperity on the land and its people.
3. Panegyryze the Pandiya King associating *Vaiyai* with the ruler and his generosity.
4. The movement of the river compared to the innate qualities of the people of Madurai.

*Paripatal* six by AciriyarNallantuvanar illustrates the angry concubine remonstrate her lover for being indifferent to her.

*Go to her, your sweetheart, if it's loving you want!  
I know the trouble you took to pluck these leaves,  
The garlands on your chest getting crushed:  
I can imagine you standing as a suppliant,  
Importuning her to accept the leaves  
While she haughtily refuses to yield  
And sent you back despite your please! (Lines  
131-137) (Pillai and Thiagarajan 59)*

The ridiculing and ironic tone of the women brings out the humour. Referring to the hero as "suppliant" begging his wife and further "importuning" or pestering her to accept the leaves while the wife arrogantly refuses to concede. It is in this act of pleading according to her the leaves were crushed. It is after undergoing this taunt he had come to her.

*The man placates and pacifies her  
Beloved! Exceeding were the floods in the Vaiyai;  
To cross which I had to use a newly made raft!  
And the leaves too became crushed and wilted  
Buffeted by the rolling waves (Lines 140-144)  
(Pillai and Thiagarajan59)*

He gives yet another reason again to appease this woman that the leaves got crushed in the rolling waves of the freshes in the Vaigairiver. He tries to salvage his stature by blaming it on the powerful waves of the river which according to him pounded the leaves. When he requests her to sport in the river, the unyielding lady refers to the *Vaiyai*'s freshes,

*Yes you're right in referring to Vaiyai's freshes  
As lovely and desirable!  
For isn't the passion of love  
Inconstant like the river's flow?  
Passion flows and ebbs like the waters of Vaiyai  
(Lines 152-156) (Pillai and Thiagarajan 61)*

This substantiates the intimacy that exists between the people and the river and establishes that 'nature' had been part of their lives. At the same time the humour that emerges through this poem is through ridicule and recklessness of the hero in affair with many women. His inconstancy is referred by the concubine mockingly to the vaigai river freshes.

**Paripatal seven** by Maiyotakkovanar pictures yet another interesting scene as men and women sport in the freshes of the river *Vaiyai*. The wife grew suspicious of her husband because a woman near the banks grew enamoured of him. The furious wife with her ruddy eyes inflamed with toddy,

beat her husband and the poor man according to the poet,

*Bowed like a penitent before his wife,  
His sandal-daubed chest prostrate on the ground  
And begged for mercy, while she  
Kicked his head, in unabated anger!  
Such were the scenes in the river side  
When the young lovers sported there in!  
(Lines 130-135) (Pillai and Thiagarajan73)*

This incident shows the lustful behaviour of the hero unabashedly exhibiting in front of his wife and in turn brazenly punished by her. These "love sports" flaunted openly shows the hilarity of the situation.

**Paripatal six** also concludes with the prayer of the heroine towards the end of the poem. Though she comes to know through the minstrel's wife (that is her friend) about the adulterous behaviour of her husband,

*. . . the virtuous heroine said  
"O Mother Vaiyai! Bless these lovers  
Who are sporting in your freshes,  
That their love may fadeless be,  
Forever cloy less and forever fresh!"*

*(Lines 208-212) (Pillai and Thiagarajan63)*

This shows the comrade and companionship which the river engenders in the celebratory mood of the *pudhupunal* or the freshes.

#### **Vaiyai and festivity of joy:**

Considering the river as a sacred space is an integral part of Tamil socio-cultural milieu. In **Paripatal Ten** by KarumpillaipPutanar the poet writes that men and women ground *akil* wood (an incensed wood), Kumkum (vermillion), camphor and all kinds of fragrant balm were thrown into *Vaiyai* seeking the blessing of the river. Some others threw,

*Little figurines golden, of snails and crabs  
And shrimps and scabbard-fish and shells,  
Praying: "May the yield increase! May the  
land prosper!"  
(Lines 147-149) (Pillai and Thiagarajan 114&115)*

Further musicians with instruments and singers sang the glory of the river on its banks. The festivities and carnivalesque mood evokes joy among the people in general.

*The theme of the singers as they wended their way  
Was all about the greatness of the river Vaiyai  
Whose benediction they sought in song and tune.  
(Lines 194-196) (Pillai and Thiagarajan117)*

**Paripatal Eleven** by AciriyānNallantuvanar writes that the Brahmins with sacred triple thread stood holding golden vessels to make offerings for worship to the river.

*"May the wide world be not parched by the heat:  
May it become cool with rains" – prayed all.  
Maidens with beautiful bangles bathed in the river  
Undertaking the austerities of Markali, initiated  
By matrons versed in ceremonials duties.*

(Lines 125-129) (Pillai and Thiagarajan127)

These lines vouchsafes the fact that the ritual austerities practiced by maidens during *Markali* known as *PaavaiNonbu* in Tamil which Vaishnavite Woman Saint/Hymnist Andal glorifies through thirty hymns of *Thiruppavai*\* belongs to the region of Madurai and had been observed for many centuries on the banks of the river Vaiyai. Andal and her father, Vaishnavite Saint Hymnist Periyalvar belong to the region of Maturai. (*Markali* refers to the Tamil month during which cold/winter season prevails the months of December and January in Tamilnadu.)

In **ParipatalEleven** by AciriyānNallantuvanar the rapid movement of the river from the mountain is compared to maidens and their clandestine affair while virtuous women and their state of wedded love to that of the river merging with its ultimate destination, the sea. Another tongue in cheek comparison is even more interesting:

*As when a handsome youth  
Eloping with his long-eyed bride across the wild  
Is intercepted and attacked by her angry kin,  
The people of Maturai blocked the Vaiyai  
As they indulged in their boisterous water sports;*

(Lines 71-75) (Pillai and Thiagarajan123)

The fleeing of the young couple hindered by their relatives is compared to the rapid movement of the Vaiyai and the people involved in water sports impede the passage of the river like the elderly relatives. This example shows how the river for the people symbolizes even their innate qualities.

Similar is another comparison where the poet questions the inconsistent nature of the river attributing frailty inherent in human nature.

*And all the while, the river Vaiyai ran limpid,  
Its waters pellucid and transparent, such that  
The celestial vehicles that sailed in the sky,  
Could be reflected therein.*

*O you, that run turbid after the rains,  
Flow in summer with cool water translucent;  
Uniform is not your nature; why may be it so?  
(Lines 108-114) (Pillai and Thiagarajan126 - 127)*

The *Paripatal* poems on Vaiyai celebrate not only nature but also bring in the dynamic interface between nature and people of the ancient society as the Vaiyai representing its socio-cultural contours. The inconsistent nature of the hero is indirectly referenced with sarcastic wit citing the transparent and turbid water of the river during summer and monsoon. The *Akampoems* analysed in this study exhibits wit, humour, camaraderie and carnivalesque mood signifying the remarkable Tamil socio-cultural values.

#### Notes

\*In *Thiruppavai* (30 hymns) by the Vaishnavite woman Saint poet Andal (the period of the VaishnaviteAlwars and SaiviteNayanmars are roughly between 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> CE) witty and humorous comparisons are made by the leading maiden who wakes up each of her friends early in the morning to observe the *PaavaiNonbu*. As these maidens reach their friend's house they are found sleeping and the girls standing outside in the stinging cold of *Markali*, in Hymn No.10 makes fun of their snoozecomparing to the sleeping demon Kumbakarna from the epic Ramayana. This demon has a peculiar boon of sleeping continuously for six months and remain awake in the next half of the year. In fact, the maiden makes fun that their friend who remains dead to the world had outdone the sleeping demon by not responding to their call.

#### Hymn No.10

nōṭruccuvarkkampuguginraammanāy\*  
māṭramumtārārōvāsaltiravādār\*  
nāṭrattuzāyumuḍinārāyaṇan\*  
nammālpōṭrapparaitarumpuṇṇiyanāl\*  
paṇḍorunālkūṭrattinvāyivīzndakumbagaraṇanum\*  
tōṭrumunakkēperuntuyiltāntandānō(Kidāmbi)

#### Hymn No.9

tūmaṇimāḍattuccuṭrumviḷakkeriya\*  
tūpamkamazattuyilaṇaimēlkaṇvaḷarum\*  
māmānmagaḷē ! maṇikkadavamtālṭiravāy\*  
māmīr !avaḷaiezuppīrō\*  
unmagaltānūmaiyoanricceviḍōanandalō\*  
ēmapperuntuyilmandirappaṭṭālō\*  
māmāyanmāḍavanvaigundanenṅru\*  
nāmampalavumnavinṅēlōrempāvāy(Kidāmbi)

In this hymn no. 9 the maidens make fun of the sleeping damsel asking her mother to awaken her. They lightheartedly refer to the damsel's mother as "... aunt, why don't you wake up your daughter! Is she deaf/mute/or possessed by magical charms tolifeless slumber.

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