The *Cāṇkam* era (meaning ‘the age of the literary academies’) in the history of Tamil literature spans over a period of about 600 years from the third century BC to the third century AD. Like the Age of Pericles in ancient Greece and the Elizabethan Age in England, the *Cāṇkam* Age is a golden epoch in its breadth and depth of literary creativity and scholarship, witnessing as it did a proliferating body of creative literature, besides *Tolkāppiyam*, an outstanding work of linguistics and literary theory. The literature of this period has come down to us in eight anthologies of verses (called Ėṭṭuttokai) and ten long poems (called Pattuppāṭṭu).

Xavier S. Thani Nayagam, who has made a penetrating study of nature in classical Tamil poetry in comparison with the treatment of nature in Greek, Latin, Sanskrit and English literatures, writes: “The content of *Tolkāppiyam* is such that, judging by the time taken for the development of comparable literatures, it would not be rash to suppose that at least three to four centuries of a flourishing literary culture have preceded the date of its composition” (*Journal of Tamil Studies*, Sep. 1972:62), which, “even by the most rigid canons”, “cannot be fixed later than the third century before Christ” (*Landscape and Poetry*, 2-3).

**Classical Genres in Tamil**

A theoretician of profound scholarship, Tolkāppiyar speaks about two basic classes of writing:

> ñō G¬ô FKō£ ŋřf Cō Ŷ A
> à¬ô¬ Ô "i ŋ L ½ô¬è P ŧô
> 9 î½ x õN« ñù , îL ô řîPJ û. (Fig)

Compositions,
That do not infringe the norms of tradition,
Fall into two classes:
Original or primary works
And secondary works or adaptations.

By definition, these two classes are
Primary or original works
Are those compositions
By men of sage wisdom
Whose consummate faculties stand unsullied
By the mire of turpitude.

Secondary works or adaptations
Derive from or depend on the primary works.

(Trans. V. Murugan, *Tolkāppiyam in English*)

While the secondary works are works of analysis, interpretation and translation (1589), the primary or the creative works of the Caṅkam age consist in two broad genres, viz. Akam and Puram even though there are references in *Tolkāppiyam* to several literary kinds such as gnomic poetry, narrative poetry, satire, riddle, proverb, etc.

As regards Akam and Puram, the former deals with the inner realm of human consciousness, specifically, the sexual love between a man and a woman, while Puram concerns itself with the exterior, namely the non-Akam aspects of life, the most conspicuous of which is martial heroism, the lesser ones being statecraft, worldly morality, bardic life, humanism, liberality, divinity, etc.

Between Akam and Puram, Akam seems to have been the privileged theme of poetic practice by the Tamil bards of the day. For out of the 2,381 verses of the extant Caṅkam corpus composed by 473 poets, 1,862 verses composed by 378 poets belong to the Akam genre. The pervasive appeal of this genre to the poetic practitioners can also be seen from the fact that the name ‘Tamil’ itself has been used synonymously with Akam poetry in works like Kurĩṅcippāṭṭu, Paripāṭal, Iraiyāṅgar Kalaviyal and Tirukkōvaiyar.

**The Classical Character of Akam Poetry**

Given below are the defining characteristics of literary classicism that manifest in the literatures of the universally recognized classical languages of the world, such as Sanskrit, Greek and Latin:
(i) The ancient genres are primarily regulative and prescriptive as against the descriptive nature of modern genres (Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 233). The classical theorists hold that genres are established patterns defined by the principles of order, regularity, restraint, harmony, idealism, and universality (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 3: 335), to which the authors must conform.

(ii) The ancient theory of genres classifies literature and literary history by specifically literary types of organization or structure, not by time or place.

(iii) The classical theory not only believes that genre differs from genre, in nature and in glory, but also that they must be kept apart, not allowed to mix. This is the famous doctrine of ‘purity of genre’... there was a real aesthetic principle (not merely a set of caste distinctions) involved; “it was the appeal to a rigid unity of tone, a stylized purity and simplicity, a concentration on a single emotion (terror or laughter) as on a single plot or theme. There was an appeal also to specialization and pluralism; each kind of art has its own capacities and its own pleasure” (*Theory of Literature*, 233-34).

(iv) Another significant characteristic of classical genres is that the form, materials and setting of a work of literature do not only coexist but they coalesce. There is a harmonious relationship, an organic unity, among them.

(v) Northrop Frye, in his brilliant and stimulating study, *Anatomy of Criticism*, argues that archetypes are inherent in human mind, and consequently in literature, a supreme product of human creativity. It is archetypal patterns that lie at the root of the prescriptive tradition of the ancient world, which are recreated as literary norms and conventions, characters and situations, symbols and images, and diction and style.

(vi) Classical poetry is governed by well-codified principles of subject matter and poetic manner. That is, there is a high degree of formalization in content and expression. It is characterized by preoccupation with form and technique, respect for literary precedent, conformity with tradition, and adherence to conventional modes of diction, syntax, metre, image-making and style.

(vii) The generic classification, such as tragedy and comedy, *akam* and *puram* is on the basis of content rather than on formal devices.

(viii) In the classical milieus in Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Tamil, the language of literary expression is mature and developed enough for the making of what has now come down
to us as classical poetry. The classical societies were able to supply the kind of materials for the poets of the day to transmute them into classical poetry.

(ix) Consequently, the classical literatures are an expression of the collective consciousness of the age rather than products of individual experience. The classical poet is a representative of the society, and his individual poetic aspirations and talents are directed towards the larger schemes of things, T.P. Meenakshisundaran’s observation that Caṅkam poetry is a group poetry par excellence applies to other classical literatures with equal truth.

(x) Again, specifically in the case of Greek, Sanskrit and Tamil, the conspicuous recurrence of diction and syntax, and the almost stereotypical repetition of certain images and attributive nouns and adjectives even in verses composed by different poets seem to indicate that the classical literatures, at least the earliest among them, had been rooted in, had drawn on and grown from the common, popular oral tradition (Hart, *The Poems of Ancient Tamil*; Kailasapathy, *Tamil Heroic Poetry*).

(xi) Classical poetry is homogeneous in character insofar as there is in it a common language and style, a shared spirit and temper. A typical classical poem is one in which the poet is subservient to the poem, with the poem outgrowing the poet.

(xii) A classical poem draws as much on the maturity of the society in which it is composed as on the maturity of the individual creator, the society’s maturity consisting in conditions of order and stability, peace and harmony.

(xiii) Classical poetry breathes a sense of universality with no trace of provinciality or localism attached to it. Its emotions are common, its ideals are general and its experiences are collective. Its characters are not individuals but types representing as they do passions and yearnings, pleasures and agonies, cares and anxieties of the humanity at large. The typical images and allusions in classical poetry are intended to invest it with an immediacy of appeal rather than to constrict its perspective.

(xiv) Classical poems have come down to us through a process of selection and ordering, which is a part of the regulative nature of classicism. That we have in Tamil classical poetry anthologies having a certain number of verses in each of them, such as *Nāṟṟipai Nāṉṉūṟu* (400 akam verses), *Aiṅkunṟumūṟu* (500 short verses), etc is a clear indication of the fact that there had existed a system of handpicking and choosing by erudite hands, privileging some and excluding others on the basis of certain predetermined criteria.
In all these ways, the *Caṅkam* literature in Tamil, including its *Akam* genre, is, fully and unambiguously, characterized by the classical conception of literary theory and practice the world over. *Tolkaṉṭippiyam*, the ancient grammar of language and literature, bears testimony to this classical prescriptive tradition with its extensive, elaborate codifications on the language of literature, literary theory, prosody, and generic conventions in Tamil in the same way as Plato (427-347 BC), Aristotle (384-322 BC), Horace (65-8 BC), Quintilian (AD 35-95), Longinus (first or third century AD) and others have done for the European classical literature, and Bhartṛhari (AD 450), Daṇḍin (AD 650), Vamana (AD 800), Ānandavardana (AD 850), Bhoja (AD 1000) and others have done for Sanskrit literature. Given below are some of the norms of poetics codified in *Tolkaṉṭippiyam*:

The importance of tradition in poetry:

```
ñō G-ō FKį "æ£µ†° ò "m-ô
ñō δNšô†i "æ£"L ū ūû. (163)
```

Compositions admit of
No violations of the conventions in vogue;
Use of diction tested through tradition
Should inform the usage therein.

```
ñō G-ō FK] i HP¶ HP¶ Y °<. (139)
```

Where deviations occur thereof
There entail variations in sense.

Non-naming in *akam* poetry:

```
ñ, èœ ,î L ô Üeî ã%ô-î ×
²† ø "ô³ "æ£-Šôæ£. (103)
```

No proper names
Shall designate the human characters
That people the compositions
Treating the (centrally placed) fivefold *akam*
love conduct.
Such proper names go right with the *puram* characters
And not with the *akam* characters.

(Trans. V. Murugan, *Tolkāppiyam in English*)

Nevertheless, the *Akam* poetry is also a product of native ingenuity and native sociocultural mores and geographical features. At the thematic level, it is a uniquely life-affirming literature, a literature of the here and now rather than of the bliss of Heaven, standing as it does in significant contrast with the contemporary literatures of not only the other South Asian languages including Sanskrit, but with those of Greek and Latin as well, which had by and large remained wedded to the prevailing trends of life-negation and world-negation, and acceptance of the supremacy of supernatural phenomena. The metrical forms of the day, *akaval*, *vaci*, *kali*, etc had been developed from the Tamil folk songs. The landscape that constitutes the backdrop of the *Akam* poetry and the flora and fauna within are the imaginative representations of the contemporary geographical realities obtaining in the Dravidian-Tamil land. Again, the *Akam* poetic conventions, its poetic theory, its aesthetics are all unique to Tamil, “quite different from anything in Sanskrit or other Indian languages” (George L Hart. ghart@socrates.berkeley.com), Hart further says:

Sangam literature is the touchstone for all subsequent literature in Tamil and shaped the future of literary discourses in the language. Even more importantly, Sangam literature is one of the great literary treasures of the world. Its works provide a Tamil perspective on life and on human experience that is quite different from anything found in Sanskrit, Latin, Greek or any other language. Its meters, its language, its conventions, and its spirit are all purely Tamil. Its scope is so large that it can easily be compared to any of the other classical languages.

He concludes:

... Tamil resembles the other classical languages - Greek, Latin, Sanskrit - in virtually every way. It is almost as old as Latin, it possesses a vital and rich literature that is peculiar to itself and is not borrowed, it was standardized at a very early time, it was used in subsequent periods, as a language of literature and discourse, and it exerted a considerable influence on the traditions of other languages. There are very few world languages that have these characteristics.
(Foreword to *Tamil among the Classical Languages of the World*, by V.C. Kulandai Swamy, 2006)

Thus, even while the ancient Tamil literature partakes of the characteristics of classical traditions in other languages of the world with respect to conformity to authority and formalization in content and expression, the *akam* genre of this literature occupies a singularly distinctive position in several ways, which include the following:

(i) Perhaps in no other language, classical or modern, is available such a large corpus of poems of consummate artistry and stylistic perfection composed on a single theme in adherence to a set of predetermined norms and conventions. These poems are a vivid exemplification of the fact that one could achieve heights of creativity even if fettered by certain prescriptions and prohibitions. The *Akam* poets have transmuted these prescriptions into standards of timeless excellence so much so that the history of much of later Tamil literature, including poems of didactic content and devotional preponderance, is largely the history of the ramifications and influences of the classical *Akam* genre.

One such *Akam* convention, as referred to earlier, is that the characters should not be mentioned by proper names, real or imagined. This apparently constricting convention, rather than stifling the creativity of the *Akam* poet, comes in handy, enabling him to breathe universality of appeal into his characters without pinning them down to any particular place, time or society. Perhaps, taking a cue from this no-naming convention, Tiruvalluvar has so studiously composed his masterpiece *Tirukkuṟaḷ* that in a body of 1330 verses there is not even a single reference to the Tamil language, Tamil country or Tamil culture.

(ii) The *Akam* poets look like the unsurpassed emotional realists, and the universe envisioned by them is an absorbing emotional-sexual universe without a parallel in the ancient classical literatures of the world. They seem to have conceived of the man-woman blood intimacy as the pivot of human progress and the basis of harmony in human relations, substantially in the way D.H. Lawrence has done nearly twenty centuries later. As such, they have portrayed sexual love as the most beautiful, most wonderful and most civilizing thing on the earth. V. Sp. Manickam, in his forthright study of the Tamil concept of love, finds the *Akam* poetry a literature of human sexual love based on “the essential principles of sexual life” (*The Tamil Concept of Love*, 1962). K.N. Sivaraja Pillai observes that the only themes that could evoke the Tamil Muse are "man's physical wants and the sensuous enjoyment" (*The Chronology of the Early Tamils*, 1932). P.T.
Srinivasa Iyengar goes a step further when he remarks that the "ineffable sex urge" constitutes the core of the Akam thematic structure (*History of the Tamils*, 1929).

True to their conclusions, there are within the Akam corpus a large number of verses that portray the bliss and pain of passion with great fervour and intensity. It is *meyyin ūrā mēvaru kāmam*, a passion of love rooted in the flesh (*Akanāṉūru* 28). The Akam hero, under the magnetic spell of sexual passion, wishes that the night should extend with more and more downpour (*Kuruntokai* 270). The lovers are so cuddled up with each other that it seems they are one, with the body of one having entered into the body of another (*Akanāṉūru* 305). The heroine becomes angry at the morning call of a cock as it disturbs her sleep in the rapturous embrace of her man (*Kuruntokai* 107). She regrets the intervention of menstruation in the enjoyment of sex with her husband (*Kuruntokai* 157).

But the Akam poetry contains no footnotes to the science of eroticism; nor is it concerned in the least for the depraved minds to feast on. It has, to use the typical Laurention idiom, nothing to do with women’s underclothing and the fumbling therewith. The literature of this kind is, as *Tolkāppiyam* puts it, the product of imaginative reality informed by dramatic and worldly realities (1002).

(iii) Insofar as the Akam poetry has no comparable predecessor or successor in the Tamil literary history, it can be termed an absolute classic as different from a relative classic - a distinction which T. S. Eliot makes with a high sense of critical discrimination in his essay "What is a Classic?". In this respect, the Akam poetry has no parallels in the other classical languages of the world.

(iv) In a majority of cases, the Akam poems mark an extreme syntactic complexity - a single superordinate clause running through either the whole verse or several lines of the verse with many subordinate clauses and phrases being embedded in it - a characteristic which indicates not just the adherence of the poet to a shared practice, but also the extreme labour put in by the fraternity of the Akam poets, An example from *Nagriṇai* (17):

*Friend! Looking at the beauty of the staggering flow of the stream through the immense, sprawling woods, that cascades from the benign, lofty mountain like the waves of the dark ocean thanks to the heavy showers at dawn,*
my eyes, cool and exceedingly lovely, started pouring tears in grief involuntarily beyond my control,

at which, mother said sweetly in a low voice, “What makes you cry thus? I shall kiss your bright teeth”; and I, in immoderate haste and even utterly disregardful of my modesty, which is more dear than life itself, very nearly said, “It is due to the pain of my passion for the chest of the lord of the sky-touching mountain,

where sapphire-hued bees drunk with honey of glory lily flowers growing on the hillslopes buzz, rivalling the honeyed strain from the strings of the lute”;

My goodness! I got away (by holding back my words).

Again, the first stanza of a Kalittokai verse (7):

Like the tyrannical sceptre of a king
Wielded after the unjust counsel of a cruel one,
The fiery rays of the sun emit oppressive heat,
And the lovely elephants in rut,
With beetles swarming about their juice,
Wear ungraceful looks shorn of their might,
And fall down flat on the desert sand
Planting their tusks right into the ground
As does the plough into a parched land;
The stately hills go barren.
To you resolved to take this tract,
Sun-baked and hard to journey thro’,
Keeping us in the dark by intent,
I have a word to convey O noble one!
Do lend your ears:

(v) Every Akam poem is a telling example of the unconscious maintenance of the balance between the rigours of tradition and the surging talent of the individual poet. That is, while conventions require that all pālai poems, for instance, use the predetermined emotional situations in the backdrop of the arid, barren landscape dotted with the given
species of flora and fauna, the individual talent of the poet invests the given poem with such of the linguistic and conceptual deviancies as are refreshingly new and original. An example from Narriṇai (2):

*Crueller than the thunderbolt that roars along with windswept rains overturning huge boulders should be the heart of this young man who is journeying by night through this wilderness,*

*where, in the gusty jungle of thriving sturdy date-palm trees by the huge, deeply entrenched, damp mountain, big-mouthed tiger cubs, with heads turned red and mouths dripping blood from biting off the heads of the travellers on the trail, lie in wait around the ūṅkai trees overgrown with pinnate soap-pod vine to prey on deer in the evening,*

*letting the delicate, sharp-toothed lass walk in front.*

(vi) The *Akam* poems typify the most poignant and most civilized poetic expressions, marked by high maturity and refinement of manners which manifest unobtrusively and yet with a compelling force in the conduct of the hero and the heroine towards each other in private, and towards the community in public. Even when they are afflicted with extremes of passion and agony, these emotions do not find a provocative expression from them. Restraint, reticence and reserve are conspicuously evident in the utterances of these characters, making the *Akam* poetry a love poetry of a high order that steers clear of sentimentality and naked eroticism. It is, in the Laurentian sense, a literature of emotional consciousness as different from mentalized sexuality of the depraved minds. Here are the words of the *Akam* heroine as she laments the indifference of the hero to the intensity of passion afflicting her (Narriṇai 94):

*O my confidante! It is but given to menfolk to respond when we fall to the passion of love and stand disconcerted and unnerved by this ailment.*

*The lord of the littoral tract whose fish-smelling waters open up the folding laurel buds in clusters - what kind of man is he -

*- he who does not understand the one that is drawn to his chest in love and suffers on account of it, bearing it in subtle ways thanks to the deterrent force of one’s womanly nature, as does the raw pearl of unbared lustre which remains unwashed and unpolished by the expert hand of the smith?*

It is, among other things, in such most nimbly treatment of the passion of love that the *Akam* poetry stands an outstanding imaginative achievement of the classical Tamil mind
with very few parallels in other classical traditions of the day. Another Akam verse (Kuruntokai 290) pictures the heroine who, reduced to an emotional nothing by the absence of the hero, speaks of her state thus:

\[ \text{...} \]

\[ \text{with a swollen heart and piercing agony,} \]
\[ I \text{ am becoming nothing at all,} \]
\[ \text{little by little,} \]
\[ \text{like the fine spray dashed} \]
\[ \text{against rocks in a great flood,} \]

which M. Shanmugam Pillai and David E. Ludden brilliantly interpret thus: “Just as water in a rushing flood is pounded on rocks into drops, spray, and finally mist, her life is being pounded away little by little, as her surging longing for him crashes on the hard fact of his absence” (Kuruntokai: An Anthology of Classical Tamil Love Poetry, 318).

(vii) The treatment of nature in the Akam poetry, which Xavier S. Thani Nayagam in his profoundly scholarly study Landscape and Poetry: A Study of Nature in Classical Tamil Poetry finds entirely novel and different from that in ancient Greek, Latin and Sanskrit poetry, wonderfully serves as an evocative vehicle of Akam love. There is, for instance, the lonesome, pining heroine who looks at the wild stream flowing down from the hill of the hero. The waters of the stream are fully covered with flowers dropping from the trees on the banks along. She accuses the stream of indifference and unfeelingness towards her, as it flows ‘stealthily’ (Akanānguṟu 398). Such a treatment of nature is not just indicative of the imaginative fecundity of the Akam poets; it is precisely this method that invests the Akam poetry with a cultured elegance unattained by most poetry, both ancient and modern, that treats of the fleshly affinities between man and woman.

For here, nature is not conceived as simply a backdrop to the human drama as is the case with most poetry of the world. It is not even a mere evocative background to the play of human emotions and deeds. The rhythms of human life and those of nature are made to correspond, coexist and coalesce in these poems. It looks like an impassioned unity of all things in the universe, an interpenetration between man and nature, verily a hylozoistic vision of life where inanimate things are endowed with animation, or even with a soul. Hylozoism implies that “... man and nature did not stand in opposition, and did not therefore have to be apprehended by different modes of cognition... natural phenomena were regularly conceived in terms of human experience, and ... human experience was
conceived in terms of cosmic events” (Donald Gutierrez, *Twentieth Century Literature*, Summer 1981). For there is the *Akam* heroine who considers the laurel tree her sister and feels shy of love-play under it, because it has been grown by her mother (*Nagriṇai* 172). She, suffering pangs of separation, inquires of the sea if ‘she’ has also been loved and deserted (*empöl kātal ceytu akgarai uṭaiyaiyō* (*Kalittokai* 130)). There is, as such, no mere juxtaposition of man and nature in the imaginative universe of the *Akam* poetry. It is a unique conception of the undifferentiated oneness of these two. The emotional coming together of the sexually matured man and woman has for its setting the montane region in the winter at the hour of midnight. The summer and the midday in the parched wasteland are the images that serve as the ‘objective correlative’ of the angst of passion the heroine suffers in her separation from the hero. The heavy downpour, the flooding jungle streams, the rutting elephant, the blossoming trees, the ripened corn, the mating birds and beasts, etc evoke the passional togetherness of the hero and the heroine. The interminable roar of the waves of the ocean at night, the unabated blowing of the northern wind in the winter, the pathetic cries of lonesome birds, the hooting of the howl, and so on are the phenomena in nature that the lonesome, despondent heroine lives with, as her man is away on his manly quests. Her sense of wretchedness and anxiety comes to us through the images of the stagnant waters, the dried-up springs, the eagle, the vulture, the devouring tiger, the heartless robbers and so on. In all these instances, the landscape in nature is in perfect harmony with the psychic landscape of the humans.

Another significant dimension of nature treatment in the *Akam* poetry is that the worlds of man and nature are brought into an organic oneness, with the latter being invested with human traits, and being apprehended by the same modes of cognition as applicable to the human world: The ripples of the backwaters sing a lullaby to the crow (*Aĩkūrũnũrũ* 163). A crane hearing the cries of pain of the beetle rushes to the spot and releases it from the crab (*Nagriṇai* 35). A dhole in the company of its mate refrains from attacking a female deer with its young one by its side (*Aĩkūrũnũrũ* 354). When its mate is killed by the hunters, a female deer denies itself food and suffers in solitude (*Akananũrũ* 371). There is the moving picture of a grieving female elephant and its calf with the male elephant killed by a tiger (*Nagriṇai* 47). When its male is caught into the net of the fishermen boys, the female crane abandons its food and makes pitiful cries from a palmyra tree (*Akananũrũ* 290). A male elephant slips down and falls into a pit. The female uproots a tree, breaks its branches and throws them into the pit for the male to use it as a ladder and come out. Such portrayals of love and tenderness in the non-human world are intended to convey a meaning and a message to the hero who has gone away
When the pining heroine tells the thundering clouds that their behaviour is unbecoming of noble persons (Nar@in@ai 238), which appear to be laughing at her condition (Nar@in@ai 214), or when a dove fans its soft feathers over its mate and protects it from the scorching sun (Kalittokai 10), it points to a kind of love poetry that is a unique contribution to world literature.

Another remarkable trait of the Akam poetry is its most accomplished and consummate use of two complex thematic operators, ul@l@ur@ai and ir@aicci, which are roughly equatable with Anandavardhana’s dhvani and T. S. Eliot’s objective correlative. Ul@l@ur@ai is a kind of implied simile that evokes the intended meaning of the text through images drawn on natural phenomena and human life. Ir@aicci is similar to ul@l@ur@ai, but differs from the latter in that it draws on the distinctive features of the landscape associated with the principal emotional behaviour treated in the given poem. These two suggestive devices should stand the unique contribution of the Akam poetry to world literature insofar as they add a new dimension to literary symbolism and insinuate conduct and emotions with extraordinary perception and insight. More importantly, it is through these two formulaic suggestive techniques that the Akam poets reveal with moderation the subtle emotional predicaments of characters and their extremely sensitive feelings, which constitutes one of the conspicuous traits of the Akam poetry. Given below is an example of ul@l@ur@ai from Akamniru (40):

The red-eyed buffalo
Detesting its stay in the muddy place
During the evening when the village sleeps,
Breaks the strong rope,
Removes the sharp thorny fence with horns,
Plunges into the watery field,
Twists the water-creepers
And eats the cool flower thronged by bees.

Here the licentious sexual conduct of the hero is revealed through the image of the buffalo: breaking the rope - destroying honour and prestige. When the pining heroine tells the thundering clouds that their behaviour is unbecoming of noble persons (Nar@in@ai 238), which appear to be laughing at her condition (Nar@in@ai 214), or when a dove fans its soft feathers over its mate and protects it from the scorching sun (Kalittokai 10), it points to a kind of love poetry that is a unique contribution to world literature.

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The following Kalittokai verse (10) exemplifies the use of īraiccī. The hero gone abroad in quest of wealth, the despondent heroine speaks to her confidante by way of self-assurance, saying that the desert tract, though cruel, has kindly spectacles that would induce the hero to return to her soon:

O my maid golden earrings wearing!
‘Hot like fire is the tract under the blazing sun
Too horrid to tread on’, he said;
‘The calf-elephant of īraiccī-drum like feet muddies
The little water sources there,
From which the male elephant drinks,
But getting its female to have it first’, he also said.

‘It is the tract’, he said,
‘Where boughs of trees unleafed inflict pain
On those that take it abandoning conjugal bliss’;
‘In this desert woe begone
The dove soothes its loving mate writhing in heat
By flapping its soft wings’, he also said.

‘It is the terrain hard to tread on
Where bamboos on the hills droop and wither
As the sun’s dense rays scorch them’, he said;
‘In the forest’, he also said,
‘There is the deer letting its shadow
Provide cool shade to its coy female in distress’.

Such are the spectacles of kindliness
There in the tract he’s taken,
He wouldn’t let my shapely beauty perish.
The Structured Evolution of Akam Love

Even though each of the *Akam* verses looks like a self-contained, autonomous whole in terms of formal structure and meaning, they lend themselves to be seen as (clusters of) strands of a structured, dynamic sequence of events in the love career of a man and a woman, thanks to the synthetic accounts of *Akam* grammar contained in *Tolkāppiyam*, and other later theoretical texts such as *Tirukkoṉaiyār, Akapporul Viḷakkam*, Commentary on *Iṟaiyaṅār Akapporul*, *Nampi Akapporul* etc. A brief account of this structured course of the evolution of *Akam* love would help see the individual *Akam* verses and their imagery in proper context.

Broadly speaking, an individual *Akam* verse is substantially informed by the features contained in the following operators of form, function and meaning:

(i) Landscape, flora and fauna, and season and time as they provide the appropriate setting for the enactment of the drama of *Akam* love career

(ii) Two broad phases of man-woman love career (viz. premarital clandestine love, and wedded love) and their attendant situations and subsituations

(iii) Utterance types assigned to the dramatis personae such as the hero, the heroine, the heroine’s confidante, etc

(iv) Addressees or listeners

(v) Emotions appropriate to different situations and states of love behaviour

(vi) Modes of comparison

(vii) Conventions with regard to maleness, femaleness, youthhood, social classes, etc

(viii) Prosodical conventions.

These operators in their totality can also be seen as constituting the framework of an *Akam* poem.

Coming to the narrative course of *Akam* love, *akam* signifies the ‘inner world’ of a man and a woman in their emotional togetherness, their love career. (Although ‘love’ or ‘sexual love’ is too inadequate to denote this inner world, we shall be using it for want of a better term). The *Akam* love ramifies into seven strands, viz. *kaikkilai* (unrequited sexual passion), *kurűći* (union of the hero and the heroine), *mullai* (patient endurance of the heroine in separation), *pālai* (separation of the hero from the heroine), *marutam* (sexual waywardness of the hero and the sulking of the heroine), *neytal* (pining of the lonesome heroine), and *peruntiṇai* (abnormal,
incompatible passion). While the first and the last strands - *kaikkilai* and *perunthai* - are considered deviant, and assigned to the lowly and the base among men, the middle five strands - *nāṭuvaṇ aintiṇai* - constitute the healthy, mutual love between a man and a woman, the love proper. These five have the mountain region, wooded plains, arid waste, cultivated lands and seashore region respectively for their backdrop and setting. (In fact, the terms *kuriṇci*, *mullai*, *pālai*, *marutam* and *neytal* primarily designate these physiographical regions, and are by association extended to the five modes of love behaviour shown above). In the Dravidian-Tamil land - extending between the Tirupati hills and Cape Comorin, and between the Western Sea and the Bay of Bengal - while the mountain region, sylvan tract, cultivated plains and maritime region have well-marked geographical identities, the arid desert is a non-descript area of hill and jungle ‘run wild’, subjected as it is to the excessive heat of the rainless summer sun.

Structurally, an *Akam* poem is constituted by three elements, viz. *mutalporul*, *karupporul* and *uripporul*. *Mutalporul* comprises aspects of space and time; space is the given landscape, and time refers to the six seasons of the year and the six divisions of the day. *Karupporul* are the characteristic regional features such as the flora and the fauna, the inhabitants of the given region, and so on. *Uripporul* is the sevenfold human love-behaviour. *Akattinai* is then the love-behaviour of the human world represented in juxtaposition with *mutalporul* and *karupporul*. These two are a living matrix where the drama of human love is enacted. In most verses, it is *mutalporul* and *karupporul* that define, inform or evoke the given human conduct. Their treatment is such that references to them evoke a vision of *uripporul*. Thus, the dark backwaters, the twilight evening and the littoral tract evoke the vision of the grieving, parched heart of the heroine; the mountain region, its luxuriant flora and fauna, the midnight hour, and the rainy season signify the surging passion of the lovers for union. There is the simultaneous association of *kuriṇci* with union, *marutam* with the promiscuous hero and the sulking heroine, and so on. The images of dried-up springs, wild dogs, sweltering heat, panting elephants, hovering vultures and the heartless highway robbers evoke the vision of *pālai* and juxtapose it with the state of the deserted heroine at home. (The table given after this Introduction contains the principal sources of *Akam* imagery in terms of *mutal*, *karu* and *uri* structural harmony).

The *Akam* love career falls into two broad phases, viz. *kaḷavu* (premarital, clandestine course), and *karpu* (wedded life).

The hero and the heroine, the central dramatis personae, the idealized, archetypal young man and young woman, in the bloom of their youth and loveliness, and well-matched in beauty, wealth, age, virtue, social standing, etc. have a chance meeting in the hilly terrain (*kuriṇci*),
where the heroine in the company of her playmates comes for water-sport in the fountains and waterfalls, or has been there doing the parentally assigned job of scaring away the birds from the grain-laden millet field, and where the hero comes chasing a wild game, or after an act of manly quest. Their eyes exchange their first glances, and both of them simultaneously feel in the very depth of their hearts a passion for each other. Poetic conventions term it *iyaṟkaippuṇarcci*, natural union, and describe it as the work of Destiny, a law unto itself, which neither the two nor their parents can unmake. Bound by the law of passion, as is the mingling of the rain water and the red soil (*Kuruntokai* 40), they become lovers for eternity. The union is both union of hearts (*uḷḷappuṇarcci*) and physical union (*meyyurpuṇarcci*). The hero confesses that it is not cognizable even by the spirits, and that it is an outward sign of their inner communion.

After the ‘union of Destiny’, the hero longs to meet her again, and has it materialized at the same spot. This subsituation is called *iṭantalaippaṭu*. He is an utterly changed man after the experience, noticing which, his confidant (*pāṅkaṛ*) calls it an infatuation and rebukes the hero. However, realizing the genuineness and intensity of his passion, the confidant offers his helping hand, goes to the place of rendezvous and reports the heroine’s presence there to the hero. The hero meets his love, and it is called *pāṅkaṛkūṭṭam*, the union brought about through the services of the hero’s confidant.

Thereafter, the heroine’s confidante (*tōḷi*) comes into the picture, and the meetings of passion go on in the thick of the hilly region unknown to the parents of the heroine and the neighbourhood. The *tōḷi* is the most complex and most ingenuously realized structural instrument in the *Akam* poetry, who on most occasions moves on a psychological plane, providing remarkable insights into the working of the human mind. The principal structural devices of the *Akam* poetry - *uḷḷurai* and *iṟaicci* - operate largely through her utterances. Of the 882 verses dealing with the premarital phase of *Akattinai*, 842, that is 95 per cent, come under *tōḷiyirkuṭṭam*, the union through the aid of the confidante. On her shoulders rests the burden of not only aiding the unhindered flow of the love relationship between the hero and the heroine, but also the responsibility of seeing that this relationship move towards the societally sanctified marital bond. She is the heroine’s unfailing link with the outside world - the hero, her foster-mother and mother - as also the heroine’s eyes and ears *vis-a-vis* all that happens around, which has a bearing upon the vicissitudes of the heroine’s love career. So intense and abiding is her intimacy with the heroine that the hero is often referred to as ‘our lover’, and the heroine’s love for the hero as ‘our love’.

*Tōḷiyirkuṭṭam* ramifies into *tōḷimatiyutapāṭu*, her detecting the sprouting of love between the hero and the heroine, and her subsequent realization that they are destined to be man
and love for all life and the life beyond too. She presses into service all her resources of mind and heart and sees the lovers rendezvous by day and by night. But the time comes when she as well as her lady gives in to the apprehension that the hero is not really serious about taking the heroine’s hand in formal wedlock. Her main occupation now becomes devising ways to hasten marriage. At first, she arranges meetings between the lovers during daytime. When these meetings become scarce as the millet corn ripens and the heroine’s watch is no longer required, she arranges trysts by night. From now on, she begins to exert pressure on the hero to get him to move toward wedded union: She dwells on the dangers attendant on his coming through the inhospitable woods for nocturnal trysting; sensing his apparent unconcern, she refuses his gifts of leaf-foliage for the heroine; and as his persistence in furtive rendezvous continues, she refuses to arrange any more meetings, and lets him know in subtle ways that only in wedded union lies the key to his eternal happiness.

The hero, brought successfully around to the need for wedded course, sets out in search of wealth for the marriage, as also to provide for the comforts of life after marriage.

There may also arise a situation in which the hero, either because the confidante refuses to facilitate further clandestine meetings or because he apprehends the refusal of the heroine’s parents to his marriage, may threaten to resort to riding a horse made of palmyra stems on the streets of the heroine’s hamlet with a view to proclaiming his passion for the heroine and soliciting the sympathy of the elders of the hamlet. However, he shrinks from actually going through with this degrading act as it would cast an irreparable slur on the passionately guarded feminine reserve of the heroine as well as on his manly dignity and honour.

Meanwhile, noticing the physical symptoms manifest in the lovesick heroine, her mother, not aware of the real cause, summons a female diviner, who diagnoses it to be an ailment caused by demonic possession. Thereupon, the priest of God Murukan is called in and he sets out to ‘exorcise’ the demon by dancing a frenzied dance (veriyāṭṭu). The crisis in the love course is further heightened by the rise of gossip and scandal about their love (alar), the consequent restrictions imposed on the movements of the heroine (îrcërippu), and the matrimonial offers from strangers (notumalar varaivu). The confidante, who is well aware that for her lady chastity is more dear than life itself, is left with no choice but to take the only virtuous course of revealing the secret love relationship between the hero and the heroine. This subsituation is known as apattoṭu nigrăl (adherence to virtue). It consists in the confidante taking the consent of the heroine and breaking her clandestine love for the hero to the foster-mother (cevili), who in turn reveals it to the mother of the heroine (narāy), from whom it goes to father and brothers of the heroine.
The clandestine love coming into public knowledge, the parents of the heroine agree to unite her with the hero in marriage, and they become man and wife. Where it does not happen, the lovers resort to elopement (utappōkkut). Elopement, however, is ascribed to the heroine's fear and anxiety that she may not get his hand, to her fear of revealing the secret to her parents and to the slander of the townsfolk (alar). It thus seems that elopement follows the inability of the heroine and her confidante to subject themselves to 'revelation-with-virtue' (ārattotu nirāl) rather than their failure to secure the parental consent. We have the oft-quoted Kalittokai verse (8) that not only celebrates the virtues of elopement, but puts the man-woman love relationship in the right perspective. This verse, along with a large number of verses of the Caṅkam poetic corpus, has a compelling claim to be placed alongside the imperishable treasures of world literature. The context of this verse is that the foster-mother goes in search of the heroine who has eloped with the hero, meets the wayfaring brahmins and makes enquiries about the lovers. The brahmins reply that they did see the lovers, and console the foster-mother saying that the lovers have taken to a course that is much in tune with the laws of nature and of virtuous human living:

O brahmins of righteous bearing  
Who shun thoughts alien to virtue  
And hold your senses in servitude,  
Who're used to horrid desert tract,  
Holding umbrellas against the scorching sun,  
With pitchers in hoops  
And the holy trident staffs  
Resting on the shoulders in order!  
O high-souled ones!  
Did you not see my daughter and an alien's son,  
The ones in loving union covert on the way?  
Not unseen by us they were,  
We did see them tread this torrid path;  
You seem to be the mother of that maid  
Decked in grace with resplendent ornaments,  
Who this desert path braved  
With a youth of quintessential bearing.

On reflection we see that  
Your daughter is to you  
What the fragrant sandal of myriad merits
Is to the mountain where it's born;
It is beneficial to those only who apply it on them.
On pondering it we find that
Your daughter is to you
What the choice white pearl is to the ocean
Where it's born;
It serves those only who wear it on them.

Weighing it right we find that
Your daughter is to you
What the enchanting melody
The seven strings in unison issue
Is to the lute where it's conceived;
It is beneficial to the songsters only.

Therefore,

Grieve not for your daughter of lofty honour
Who's gone in sacred union with an exalted one;
This is the way of virtue unswerving too.

(Trans. V. Murugan, Kalittokai in English)

Thus begins the wedded course (kaṟpu) of love-behaviour of the hero and the heroine. That elopement (utappōkkku) and revelation - with-virtue (aṟattoṭu nīṟṟal) fall under the kaṟpu phase indicates the sublime and high-minded conception of man-woman relationship by the classical Tamil mind: the wedded state begins at the moment the secret love comes into the knowledge of the society, or at the moment the lovers decide to elope, notwithstanding the fact that the very first natural union binds them for life, and beyond too. The other sub-situations of the wedded life are: (i) the ecstasy and bliss of conjugal togetherness (malivu), (ii) the feigned love quarrels (pulavī) that are like salt which seasons the mess, (iii) the mood of variance and sulking of the heroine (ūṭāl), (iv) the resolution of sulking (uṇarvu), and (v) separation (pirivu) of the hero. The middle three subsituations relate to the hero’s pursuit of concubines and harlots, the consequent emotional strain and the ultimate reconciliation. The poems depicting these events of a promiscuous husband and a wife of unswerving conjugal fidelity envision a society where the rock-like forbearance and fortitude of womenfolk provide stability and meaning to the central human institution of marriage, who zealously guard it against attempts at sabotage by the
mercurial fickle-mindedness of the other sex. The following Kalittokai verse (74) captures this vision, marked as it is by a sense of melting passion and commitment:

‘The concourse of playing women
With their exquisite ornaments tinkling
Run around the wet fields waters abounding
To pluck the densely petalled āmpal
Along with the longish evenly blossomed neyal;
The clamour thereof frightening,
The flock of birds with comely feathers
That feed on the āral fish
Would fly off to perch on the raised boughs of lofty trees,
And clatter their fright over and over
Like the women of warring eyes
Revealing to their kin
The torment their passion inflicted;
Your lord of the goodly town of battle din,
Being ever after coupling with women fresh and untested,
Everyday is a day auspicious for union,
It is anguish to me O lady!
But you remain undistressed’.
Thus go your words solicitous,
O my dear friend!
Now let me make it plain:

I would react saying,
‘You’ve come splendour wearing,
What do you hold me to be?’
Consigned to oblivion all it gets
As I prepare to receive the guests
Who come in tumult on a chariot
Drawn by tenacious steeds of ruffled manes.
I would sulk saying,
‘Come not here to our house
With flowers on you withered’;
The variance dissolves unable to prolong
As he comes placatingly,
With my fear of a false oath by him
Coming as strategy handy for him.
I would go sullen saying,
‘O the promiscuous one!
You did stay all day with whores’;
He’d then seek pretence of sleep
Holding in embrace our son
Who’s had his father’s illustrious name
Aptly bequeathed by blood.

As such,

O my confidante!
I do indeed grieve at heart
Over the debauchery of my lord;
Deceptive that he is
Who despoils the charms made up of women
With eyes blossoms-like;
But my variance does not hold,
And comes to naught
As I go to receive the guests,
As I fear the consequences of his false oath,
And as I see him embrace our son prized of our life,
Where they look consequential;
It’s all my bond of charge!

(Trans. V. Murugan, Kalittokai in English)

A similar strain, veiled in ịrịicci symbolism, runs through the following Naṭṭipai verse (280):

O confidante! You tell me not to go in a variant mood albeit the uncontained adulterous ways of my lord of the agricultural tract of cool waters,
where the luscious mango fruit gets snapped by the perching of a crane and falls into the watery pond in which thrive water lily plants with buds resembling white cranes sitting folded up.

I would not sulk with him, for I could hardly chance upon him, pressed without respite as I would be with feeding the many guests visiting our virtuous home which matches up with the Kūṟūṟ town of the ripe ancient Vēḷir clan,

where the guards of fields break the shells of the curly snails on the stony backs of the tortoises in the fields (for eating them).

(Trans. V. Murugan)

And the extended separation of the hero from the heroine in the wedded phase occurs, as the former goes in pursuit of learning and scholarship, as he goes to defend the country against an external foe, as he is assigned an ambassadorial task, or as he goes to earn wealth.

Although the Akam poetry reads a literature of human sexual love, as V. Sp. Manickam would describe it with a sense of irrepressible conviction (The Tamil Concept of Love, 1962), it seems to be concerned with the whole of human personality. Sex is not viewed as the be-all and end-all of life. There is a natural balance between the affections of the heart and the will of the mind. The kūriṇci (mountain tract) poems are passionately and obsessively concerned with the fulfilment of the emotional needs of man. The kūriṇci world is a world of men who dance in blessed servitude to the dictates of their ‘phallus’ and the kūriṇci hero takes it as a mark of his greatness to journey to his love’s place at the dead of night braving the vagaries of man and nature. He is willing to get the fire of his male strength and will subdued in the waters of female passion and tenderness. He would not mind even death after his passional centres were renewed just once in the soft and tender springs of female flesh. But man represents ‘motion’, the dynamic principle of life. Purposive activity constitutes the very breath of his being (vīgaiyē āṭavarkku uyirē). He is not only a lover and a husband, but also a ‘hero’, and life “without heroic effort, and without belief in the subtle, life-long validity of the heroic impulse is just stale, flat and unprofitable”, says D. H. Lawrence. And hence the Akam hero leaves on his quest away from home, knowing fully well that his lady would fall into death-like anguish and emotional starvation, that his separation would emaciate her bamboo-like, rotund arms.

This precisely seems to be the meaning of the separation poems. Man, as the ancient Tamil mind conceived of it, is the lord, the hero, the doer, and no poem in the Akam corpus says that he is deterred by the difficulties of his quest. He does postpone his journey, but that is to prepare his mind fully for separation after consoling the heroine, says Tolkāppiyam (1128,
His determination certainly wavers when his love tries to prevent him with threats of dying in lonesome distress, or when her confidante argues in favour of uninterrupted conjugal bliss. There is a classic poem in Nāṟṟippaṟi (284) which pictures the conflict in the mind of the hero torn as he is between the charms of his beloved and the compulsions of his manly mission:

*My heart says, “Let’s go back and relieve the pain of separation of my loving woman who has dark tresses hanging low on her back, and water lily flower-coloured, collyrium-fed, glittering eyes with cool brows and who has bonded me to hers”.*

*And my mind says, “Abandoning the deed unfinished is a folly and will land one in disgrace as well. Ponder it right and stay resolute. Go not in haste”.*

*Will my body be torn between the two and die away as does an old rope of worn-out strands pulled in opposite directions by elephants with shining, upraised tusks?*

(Trans. V. Murugan)

But his male self triumphs ultimately. And his lady too recognizes the need for the fulfilment of her man’s material self, and she reflects that feminine virtue lies in not putting impediments in his way: “Menfolk are after deeds, and they are given to going apart in quest of wealth. To acquiesce in it is but a way of virtue” (Nāṟṟippaṟi 24). A Kuruntokai poem (43) is even more explicit:

*I wrongly thought he wouldn’t leave;*  
*And he wrongly thought I wouldn’t agree.*

Such is the meaning and message of the Akattippai literature in Tamil.