Is Akam Poetry Romantic?

A. A. Manavalan

A Case for clarification

Akam and Puram are the two divisions of the body of Tamil Literature known as the Caṅkam classics. This dual classification is neither compilatory nor arbitrary, but thematic and traditional. Akam poetry is concerned with an idealised form of love in its various attitudes and phases. Love episodes in epics and in other forms of narrative works, and certain other elements like the description of the five-fold tīnais are manifest throughout the history of Tamil Literature. This narrowing down in its concept and convention due to the social and literary milieux has resulted in the discontinuity of the tradition reducing its original aim and execution to those of mere love poems.

Owing to the everwidening senses of the terms, Romance and Romanticism, Romantic poetry is being loosely understood to be concerning itself with such human love in the main. Hence the vague association between Akam and Romantic poetries. Moreover, the nomenclature of Romantic poetry as Subjective/Personal poetry, and the fact that Akam poetry also deals with love between a man and a woman which is of course personal and subjective, have also contributed much to such conceptual confusion.

This short article attempts to bring home the point that these two literary genres of the East and the West are not similar but quite different from each other in subject matter and poetic manner as well.

What is Akam Poetry?

The term Akam means in Tamil in or inner and thus the inner aspect of human experience, while the term Puram mean outer and thus the outer aspect. The term ‘inner aspect’ does not mean just any inner experience that a human being is capable of. It refers here only to the emotive experience of love between a man and a woman. There are other aspects of human experience like justice, friendship, psychic release and other such spiritual things which are also really inner, but they are not intended here. Akam does not have anything to do with these. Akam poetry has thus restricted relevance and reference only to an idealised form of love represented in a highly conventionalised poetic idiom. Again the chief forte of the aspect of Akam love is the sexual union and all the other aspects treated in it whether precede it or attend on it.1

English Romantic Poetry

Unlike the term Akam poetry which fits into such a neat definition, Romantic poetry does not lend itself to any single definition acceptable to all shades of critical opinion. Some important definitions or explanations may be considered here:
(1) The essence of Romantic poetry is that in catching the fleeting moment of joy it opens the doors to an eternal world.2

(2) Romanticism can be defined only in terms of pure psychology. Any other formula alters or limits arbitrarily its very essence.3

(3) Among the many semantic accretions of the word Romanticism, two closely related ideas are the most fertile sources of implications: liberty and emotions. Liberty covers individualism and rebellion against rules, authority and tradition; the emotions seem to involve spontaneity, the subconscious. . . and other human characteristics that are non-rational such as "life force", intuition, the mystical faculty.4

(4) Complex and baffling as Romanticism is to define there can be little doubt that the heart of it was the egotistical sublime—the cult of original, distinctive personality, the impassioned belief in individualism, the use of poetry for self-projection, self-analysis, self-assertion and ultimately sometimes for exhibitionism and self-gratification. The first and foremost article of the Romantic creed was the affirmation of a god like 'I' that makes the poetic world and that in creating poetry creates itself.5

(5) The central distinctive feature of the Romantic mode is the search for a reconciliation between the inner vision and the outer experience expressed through 'a creative power greater than his own because it includes his own' (Frye); or

(6) The synthetic imagination which performs this reconciliation and the vision it produces of a life drawing upon' a sense of the continuity between man and nature, and the presence of God' (Wellek).6

A discriminating study of the best of English Romantic poetry will convince us that none of the definitions or explanations quoted above is complete in itself. Each of them has some salient aspect of Romantic poetry in view, but only some aspect. It is not very difficult to see the reason for such multiplicity of opinions. Besides the fact that Romanticism itself varies in perspectives from Nation to Nation as French Romanticism, German Romanticism, etc., the creed of English Romanticism also varies from poet to poet. The pithy phrases applied to these poets such as: Blake the visionary, Wordsworth the poet of Nature, Coleridge the metaphysician, Keats the lover of Beauty, Scott the romancer, Shelley the reformer, Byron the rebel, etc., bear ample testimony to the multiplicity of phases of Romantic poetry. Hence such a welter of opinions. The chief differences of opinion in this regard can however be said to lie in the attempt to characterise the entire body of English Romantic poetry either as timeless or temporal. For example, while Lovejoy7 advocates 'timeless characterisation' by identifying certain ideas, Poetic, Social and Philosophical, in the poetry of any age or nation, Northrop Frye and Rene Wellek would have it to signify
'a historical centre of gravity which falls somewhere around the 1790 -1830 period.' The possible definitions of Romantic poetry are thus not only various but also varied.

**Akam Versus Romantic Poetry**

However, it would suffice for the present enquiry to note that the cardinal differences between these two important genres of poetry stem from the fact that whereas *Akam* poetry is essentially objective/impersonal, Romantic poetry is subjective/personal. Understanding the significance of a piece of Romantic poetry is, therefore, possible only when the social and literary milieux of the Romantic poet are brought to bear on such exposition. This is not so in the case of *Akam* poetry. Biographical elements of an *Akam* poet have no bearings on his poetry. A reasonable grasp of the poetic convention of *Akam* is enough to understand and enjoy it.

**Choice of Subject**

*Akam* exclusively deals with heterosexual human love between an ideal pair with the necessary antecedent and attendant phases. Mutual love in their hearts kindled from a providential encounter is an essential and unexceptional prelude to the love depicted in this poetry. Love in *Akam* does not exclude consummation and almost all the implications and delicate emotions pertaining thereto are given candid but decent expression.

Treatment of human love in Romantic poetry is *only one of the many subjects dealt with*. Romantic poetry is concerned with numerous things. To a Romantic poet even "the meanest flower that blows can give/Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." Choice of Subjects is quite banal to him.

"The Romantics were concerned with the things of the spirit and hoped that through imagination and inspired insight they could both understand and present them in compelling poetry". These poets had a predilection for the unfamiliar and strange, for the remote in place and time and for an experience beyond the senses. Romantic poetry is, therefore, replete with such experiences and emotions, usually psychic and hence intangible.

There have been poets like John Keats who have lavished their poetic powers on sensuous representation of their experience, but such sensuous representation is only a medium through which they lead the reader to the *beyond*. The immediate is made use of for the explanation or exposition of the eternal. For example, Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* was occasional in origin. The poet heard the song of the bird and set out to describe its effect, but crossed soon the temporal and was in a vision, a waking dream:

Thou wast not born for death immortal bird!

No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard

In ancient days by emperor and clown:

Perhaps the selfsame song that found a path

Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,

She stood in tears amid the alien corn;

The same that oftentimes hath

Charm’d magic casements, opening on the foam

Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

The song of the bird which was tangible is shown to be a symbol of timeless song. The very inspiration is fired by an actual case but soon transports the poet to the world of vision, to an experience of the timeless, of “some undefined superior order of things. This dual purpose gives a special character to Romantic poetry.”

For a variety of reasons the romantic poets felt forlorn, cut off from the world about them. They felt that they were out of tune with their environs and that in a way ‘Time was out of joint’ for them. Hence they sought for a reconciliation between the inner vision and the outer experience. This they expressed through the ‘synthetic imagination which performs this reconciliation. It is precisely because of this nature of Romantic poetry that it is concerned with the whole gamut of human experience and hence no restriction with regard to choice of subject.

Treatment of Love in Akam and Romantic Poeties

Leaving the other subjects of Romantic poetry aside, if we restrict our comparison to the treatment of love alone even then Akam and Romantic poetries differ in many respects. The most important of the differences may be considered here.

I. The notion and nature of love in Akam has been poetically concocted from actual life and for actual life. It is neither wholly realistic nor wholly idealistic. It is a poetic amalgamation partaking of the best and the desirable from actual life leaving aâide the undesirables and the accidental. That is, the delights of love alone are delineated and the distresses deleted. Obviously therefore, the poet's personal emotions have nothing to do with those represented in Akam. Because it is not a single person's vision or experience but that of a scholarly society through the ages. Even in cases where he or she could be recording his or her own emotions and feelings thereof, they have to be objectified in the conventional norms. Objectivity or impersonality in representation is thus a cardinal principle of poetic expression in
the realm of Akam poetry. And this poetic convention is another key whereby the note of timelessness and imparticularity is achieved. Idealism relishes neither the particular nor the personalities.

It is because of such idealised realism in the attitude of love represented in Akam, that it is applicable to every man and woman on the earth beyond the barriers of colour, creed or clan. Universality of appreciation and application is the key note of Akam poetry. Since no other known literature of the world has such poetry of ideally codified love of universal application, Akam poetry is Universal and Unique at once.

Love in Romantic poetry is quite personal and individual in all aspects. It is neither conditioned nor governed by any convention or tradition. In most of the cases the romantic poetry sings of the love of the poets. In cases where a romantic poet has represented the emotion of love of some other characters like Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes" or Isabella, and the like, because of the use of proper names of the characters, it is personal and hence particular.

2. Love in Akam is shown to be transpiring between a man and a woman both of whom have just stepped into adolescence and are unmarried at the time of their first encounter. In case where 'married love' is portrayed, it is always the same pair celebrated in the pre-marital phase.

Romantic lovers are not always unmarried. A married man may be in love with an unmarried woman, with his wife alive or with another married woman. S. T. Coleridge's love for Sara Hutchinson and P. B. Shelley's affair with Mary Godwin are too well-known to need details. Freshness of youth is not a postulate in romantic love.

There are, of course, many Akam poems which speak of the lover's visit to harlots. But such visits are intended only as a poetic device to intensify a phase of marital love called marutam; 'this feeling may be called bouderie or sulking. Moreover a lover in Akam would not desert his ladylove for ever in preference to a harlot. He would go back to his lady and crave for her forgiveness. No Akam lady would refuse her spouse on this ground. The force of this Akam convention is to enhance the conjugal felicity of the lovers by adding this note of sulking.

3. Love in Akam ends essentially in a peal of wedding bells. There is no celebration of unrequited love in Akam. The term Kaikkilai does not denote unrequited love. It means a mode of love in which a lad falls in love with a lass and complains of her indifference. It is not unrequited love since the girl has not yet come of age to understand either the pleasures or pangs of love, and hence her coldness. The lad's anguish is generated by his own ignorance of approach.

Had the lass been sexoscient and refused the boy's advances then comes in the question of unrequited love and this sort of love is found in Romantic poetry. For example, the following lines by Lord Byron from his autobiographical poem, The Dream reveal his unhappy youthful love-affair with Mary
he had ceased
To live within himself; she was his life
The ocean to the river of his thoughts,
Which terminated all: upon a tone,
A touch of hers, his blood would ebb and flow,
And his cheek change tempestuously—his heart
Unknowing of its cause of agony.
But she in these fond feelings had no share:
Her sighs were not for him; (Stanza II)
...............................................................
She knew she was by him beloved—she knew,
For quickly comes such knowledge, that his heart
Was darkened with her shadow, and she saw
That he was wretched, but she saw not all. (Stanza III)

4. Akam poetry does not portray the darker sides of love such as loss of life in the case of lovers. Death has no place in it.

In Romantic poetry we quite often hear of a lover weeping over the death of his lady love.

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me! (Stanza III)

o pale, pale now, those rosy lips,
I aft hae kissed sae fondly!
And closed for aye the sparkling glance
That dwelt on me sae kindly;
And mouldering now in silent dust
That heart that lo’ed me dearly!
But still within my bosom’s core
Shall live my Highland Mary. (Stanza IV)

5. There is no treatment of ageing or the mutability of physical beauty in Akam poetry. Where such things are hinted at they only aim at inducing the lover to expedite the progress of love towards marriage in the pre-marital phase or at dissuading the lover from his proposed departure for a distant place in the
post-marital phase. No pining by the lover for such a decay is heard. The notion of transience of physical beauty is expressed not to deter the lover from his pursuit but to make him determined to accomplish it soon and to enjoy it for long.

Romantic poetry on the other hand records such decay, and many poets have given vent to such impermanence. John Keats sings:

Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies...
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow. (Ode to a Nightingale)

William Cowper, a master in simple pathos and in portraying the elementary greatness which rests on the most universal human feelings, records such transitoriness of human life as follows:

Thy spirits have a fainter flow,
I see thee daily weaker grow-
'Twas my distress that brought thee low, My Mary!

Thy silver locks, once auburn bright
Are still more lovely in my sight
Than golden beams of orient light, My Mary!

And should my future lot be cast
With much resemblance of the past,
Thy worn-out heart will break at last My Mary!... (To the same)

6. There is no place for intrigue, rivalry, betrayal of love, cuckoldry, etc., in Akam. No rival groom is brought in in this poetry albeit news of his approach is hinted at in order that the lover should gear up his efforts to lead his love to the altar. The rosy side of love alone finds poetic treatment.

All such deviations are found in Romantic poetry. The love-affair of Don Juan, with Julia seven years senior to him (another eccentric feature) is a good example of intrigue and cuckoldry. Sir Walter Scott's Lochinvar shows us a rival bridegroom, 'a laggard in love and a dastard in war' almost winning the bride Ellen, when the brave Lochinvar arrives at the bridal feast and rides off with her.

Betrayal of love is also a common feature in Romantic poetry. Hartley Coleridge portrays such betrayal in his song, She is not fair to as follows:
Her loveliness I never knew
    Until She smiled on me...
But now her looks are coy and cold,
    To mine they never reply,
And yet I cease not to behold
    The love-light in her eye:
Her very frowns are fairer far
    Than smiles of other maidens are.

Such betrayal, a passive unrequitedness becomes conscious and voluntary desertion in Romantic poetry. Such desertions are sometimes due to ill-luck and at times due to traitorous behaviour of the lover. For example,

Where shall the lover rest
    Whom the *fates* sever
From his true maiden's breast
    parted for ever?

The poet here is sorry for the fateful severance of the lovers.

Where shall the traitor rest,
    He, the deceiver
Who could win maiden's breast,
    Ruin, and leave her?

Such deceitful behaviour of a lover is not only described but also condemned in Romantic poetry. The poet here chafes with anger and calls down terrible curses upon the lover:

Her wing shall the eagle flap
    O'er the false hearted;
His warm blood the wolf shall lap
    Ere life be parted:
Shame and dishonour sit
    By his grave ever;
Blessing shall hallow it
    Never, O never!

*Eleu loro
Never, O never!*

It is quite alien to *Akam* poetry to portray such deviations.
7. It is clear from the points discussed so far that Romantic poetry deals with both the seamy side and the rosy side of love, and more of the former, very less of the latter. The reason is not far to seek. It is due to the essential mood of Romanticism.

There prevails in it a sense of aloofness, of yearning and of an agony of the disappearing dream and an unquenchable thirst for the permanence either of the psychic gratification or of the self itself. The reconciliation between their vision and their outer experience, a balance for their spiritual and physical (earthly) aspirations was not realisable in the case of most of the Romantic poets. What Wordsworth remarks in relation to 'Chatterton, the marvelous Boy':

- By our own spirits are we deified:
- We poets in our youth begin in gladness;
- But thereof come in the end despondency and madness. 

and what Keats records from his experience in contrast with the world of the bird:

- The weariness, the fever, and the fret
- Here, where men sit and hear each other groan ;...
- Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
- And leaden-eyed despairs;

are cases in point answering to such a Romantic mood.

Shelley's *Epipsychidion* is a good example of typical Romantic love. In this most exalted of love songs, Shelley hails Emilia Viviani, a beautiful 19-year-old Italian girl as a 'Seraph of Heaven, too gentle to be human.' Ladies have been many with whom Shelley was in love. Harriet Grove, Mary Godwin, Emilia Viviani are the most important of them. Shelley's concept of love-'true love'-was also idealistic, but his notion of ideality was spiritual rather than physical. He loved Harriet for her physical beauty and Mary for her intellectual companionship. His love for Emilia was spiritual in origin. He sings:

- For in the fields of immortality
- My spirit should at first have worshipped thine,
- A divine presence in a place divine; 

Because of his such concept of love he does not relish the idea of constancy in love and that too with only one person. He voices his protest against the custom that one should love and wed only one lady, at least at one time:

- I never was attached to that great sect.
- Whose doctrine is that each one should select
Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend...

With one chained friend, perhaps a jealous foe

The dreariest and the longest journey go.\textsuperscript{27}

For Shelley true love means ideal love, i.e., Platonic love. He thinks consequently that there is no question of diminishing of one's love even when one is in love with more than one person at the same time. Divisibility of ideal love he seems to emphasize in the following lines:

True love in this differs from gold and clay,
That to divide is not to take away.
Love is like understanding that grows bright
Gazing on many truths; 'tis like thy light,
Imagination!\textsuperscript{28}

His comparison of the emotion of love to understanding and imagination takes off the physical attributes of love and places it on the plane of spirituality. This he further ensures by naming his poem \textit{epi-psychedion} which means, "a little soul upon a soul, a Platonic inner soul... We may translate Epi-psychedion as ' a song of praise about the little soul within the soul'.\textsuperscript{29}

Emilia Viviani whom Shelley is celebrating in this poem as his lady love, an idealised \textit{anima}, disillusions him soon by meekly accepting the husband chosen by her father. Thus even Emilia whom he has celebrated as a 'Seraph', has proved herself to be a 'sod'. Shelley could never achieve his spiritual love since the 'sod', the launching pad of the spirit is inevitably anchored to the earth. Hence the never-ending yearning of the lover in Romantic poetry.

Most of the Romantic love poetry being personal or personalised and being too ideal and spiritual to be realised, successful love is seldom portrayed. Most of these love songs, therefore, end on a melancholy note.

There is on the other hand a sense of complete realization of the emotion of love in \textit{Akam}. There are poems of separation (pålai) and pining (neytal) but they are still pleasure-oriented and never peril-mongering. Tamil Poetic convention has so concocted the theory of \textit{Akam} poetry that the \textit{sun of delight never sets in the Akam empire}.\textsuperscript{8}

8. Objects of Nature do form part of \textit{Akam} poems. Portrayal of the flora and fauna is copious, but their function is most often ancillary. They serve as a sympathetic background to the human drama. And this too is subject to the room available in the verse form selected. Treatment of Nature in \textit{Akam} is, therefore, not essential, eventhough elaborate depiction of certain phases of love such as related to \textit{Kuriñchi}, \textit{Marutam}, etc., may entail their inclusion.
Nature is the mainstay for the Romantics. In it all of them found their initial inspiration. But their love poems do not have elaborate treatment of Nature. Their treatment of Nature is a separate major category of Romanticism.

9. There are some supernatural elements in Akam. But, their portrayal is most often only referential, not represented. Being codified as one of the elements of (Karupporuḷ) they only supplement the other human-background to the main theme (Uripporuḷ) of a poem. They are not, therefore, operative and are never allowed to interfere with the human action.

But in Romantic poetry they are also characters of importance. At times they govern the human action. The ghost in Keats's Isabella merely assists the human action whereas the lady in his La Belle Dame Sans Merci and the fair Geraldine in Coleridge's Christabel are malignant supernatural creatures obstructing and upsetting the human actions. They have thus a free participation in the plot of the poem and more often than not they emerge victorious over the human characters.

10. Akam poetry consists of individual poems varying in length from three lines to some hundred lines. The entire body of this poetry has been compiled into five anthologies each of which contains poems classified in view of their length. Of these Ainkurunuru contains 499 poems ranging from 3 to 6 lines each. Kuruntokai contains 402 poems ranging from 4 to 8 lines each. Narinai contains 400 poems having 9 to 12 lines each. Akananuru has 401 poems having lines between 13 and 31 each. Kalittokai contains 150 poems ranging from 11 to 80 lines each (Kali 6 and 104). Apart from these some more Akam poems are included in Paripatal and three poems (Mullaippattu-103 lines, Kurincippattu-261 lines and Pattinappalai-301 lines) are included in Pattuppattu an anthology of longer poems.30

Irrespective of its length each of these poems depicts one and only one phase of Akam love. Each poem is complete in itself. Every poem is, therefore, unitary in theme and structure. Continuous and concatenated narration of more than one phase of love in one poem does not find sanction in Akam poetry.

Romantic poetry has no such defined structure. Romantic love is depicted in small poems such as those on Lucy by Wordsworth as well as in sustained narrative poems like Keats's, The Eve of St. Agnes or Byron's Don Juan.

11. There are strict metrical rules with regard to the verse form selected for Akam poetry. No poet of this poetry could have the freedom to violate these. He may have freedom in choosing the verse, say Aciriyam, Kali or paripatal, but he should conform to the traditional pattern of the verse selected. That is to say he would not invent a form of his own.

But Romantic poets were not at all under any such poetic obligations. They would simply abhor such rules. Ode, ballad, sonnet, lyrics, the Alexandrian line were some of the forms which these poets had
inherited; but they paid little attention to the convention. They made freely whatever changes they thought
fit for their expression. Thus Wordsworth's sonnet is not of classical pattern; Coleridge's *Dejection* does
not conform to the conventional form of an ode; his *Christabel* introduces a new metre; and Burns and
Cowper have their own patterns of lyrics. Not only did these romantics change the patterns of the forms
they inherited from their predecessors, but also differed from their contemporaries. Thus Keats's odes are
different from those of Wordsworth's or Coleridge's; nor does his sonnet conform to the pattern of
Wordsworth's. On top of it, even his own odes are not alike in form. His odes To A *Nightingale*, To
*Autumn* and *First Ode to Fanny Brawne* differ in respect of stanza pattern such as the number of lines,
the metre, the rhyme scheme, etc. Such differences are seen even within one of his Odes namely the
*First Ode to Fanny Brawne*. We are able to see that stamp of individuality and spirit of revolt against
conventions are manifest even in the poetic forms they innovated or renovated.

12. There is a poetic proviso in *Akam* that the main characters related to Uripporuḷ shall have no proper
names, but only those associated with their regions like *malaiyan*, *cērppan*, etc., or relational names like
Talaivan, Talaivi, etc., should be used. This is intended to maintain the impersonality of the emotions and
to retain the universality of application.

There is no observance of such rules in romantic love poetry. Only proper names are used.

*Akam* poetry has thus got inviolable poetic conventions with regard to the subject matter and style
as well. Neither the subject matter nor the poetic manner has any such restraints over the romantic poet.
He is free to choose any subject and any form of expression.

There are thus too many essential differences between the *Akam* poetry of the Tamils and the
Romantic poetry of the West to mistake the one for the other. A deep study of these two kinds of poetry
does however, contribute to the widening of our literary perspectives and to the deepening of our poetic
sensibilities.

Foot notes


24. *Resolution and Independence*, stanza VII.

25. *Ode to a Nightingale*, stanza III.


27. — lines 149-151, 158-159.

28. — lines 160-164.


30. The particulars are according to Prof. S.Vaiyapuri Pillai’s edition Cankam Works, Madras, 1967, 2nd edn. Vols. I & II.


This Article taken from A. A. manavalan’s ‘Mutual Flames’ book.