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THE DEVIANT LOVES OF CLASSICAL TAMIL LOVE POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The Tamil concept of love is broadly divided into three categories: kaikkilai, aintinai and peruntinai. This division has been done by Tolkappiar, author of *Tolkappiam*, considered to be the founding text for the whole of classical Tamil literature, popularly known as Sangam Literature. This article focuses on kaikkilai, the one-sided love and peruntinai, the mismatched love. It ponders over the marginality of these two aspects of love and explores whether any ulterior motive lurks behind the marginalisation of these akam aspects and the canonisation of the aintinai aspects and reaches the conclusion that there is a measure of politics at play in this hierarchisation. It supports this conclusion not only from evidence borrowed from studies carried out in the past but also the findings from contemporary research. It tries to envision the kind of Tamil literature which would have evolved had these impulses been allowed to take their natural course.

Key words: kaikkilai, peruntinai, akam, matal, tinai, carnivalesque

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INTRODUCTION

There are five aspects of love in Classical Tamil Love Poetry, which, for the sake of brevity, we shall call "akam" poetry. They are Union (*Punartal*), Separation (*Pirital*), Awaiting (*Iruttal*), Wailing (*Irangkal*) and Quarrel (*Utal*). The akam conventions tied these aspects of love to a particular tinai or physiographical region. The mountains (Kurinji) claimed Union, the desert (Palai) had Separation, the forest (Mullai) is fit for Awaiting, the seashore (Neidal) is apt for Wailing and the riverside (Marutam) became a vehicle for Quarrel. (Marr.19) There must be some sort of logic to the way these aspects were assigned which is very clearly evident in making the desert the right location for feelings of sorrow induced by separation of husband from wife for reasons of making wealth or war. Traditional scholarship has categorized every akam (love) poem as belonging to one of these five major tinais, known as *Aintinai*. As if acting on afterthought that these five tinais do not cover all aspects of love, later commentators, particularly Nacchinarkiniar, have condescendingly assigned four poems to *Kaikkilai* (one-sided love) and ten poems to *Peruntinai* (mismatched love), (Mariaselvam.110). A single anthology *Kalittokai*, the latest among the eight anthologies of *Ettutokai*, contains all these deviant love

poems. It is my intention to show that though these two genres of love poetry contain only a smaller number of poems, they have not been accorded the importance they merit.

Kaikkilai

Kaikkilai, etymologically meaning a single branch or one hand, might have, in course of time, when applied to human love, come to mean one-sided or unreciprocated love. (Marr. 23) Tolkappiar places it as the first of love, in the very first rule that he formulates under *Akattinaiyial* and places Peruntinai in the end: "Kaikkilai mutalap peruntinai iruvay ---." Hence in the order of enumeration these two occur as extremes. (Mariaselvam.109)

Kamil Zvelebil, an acknowledged scholar of Tamil studies, has said:

Very interesting are the peripheral erotic setting, kaikkilai and peruntinai. The first which is the one-sided affair, unrequited love, occurs when the man feels a desire for a girl unawakened by sexual impulses and dwells hopelessly on his infatuation. (*Tamil Lit.* 41)

The exact phrase that describes the state of the girl is "*kamam sala ilamayol.*" She is a girl-woman, in her pre-puberty stage, not knowing the pleasure or pain of love. Elaborating it further, Mariaselvam states that kaikkilai is "per defectum, i.e. unrequited, unreciprocated love; some even call it 'subnormal love.' " (109) Translating Tolkappiar's description, he adds: "Unreciprocated love occurs in the act of having pleasure in addressing a girl who is not matured for enjoyment, he being possessed agony of love, having affliction which cannot be removed and attributing good and evil to himself and to her without having any reply from her." (109) Dr V.Sp. Manickam (1962) has asserted that "Kaikkilai may be said to be an abortive form of Ahattinai." (136) Among the four poems identified as kaikkilai, Kapilar has authored, 56, 57 and 58 and Nallurutiranar one, 109. All of them are in the *Kalittokai* collection.

A common ground between kaikkilai and peruntinai poems is that *akam* conventions do not privilege them with a specific landscape and time whereas the *aintinai* have a proper landscape and proper season and time (*perumpolutu* and *sirupolutu* respectively) for the conduct of these love affairs.

From out of these entire observations one can draw the following conclusions: kaikkilai is the result of the immaturity of the girl, one who does not know how to respond to the passionate, even frenzied appeals of love from the hero. Kapilar, who is quite consummate in describing feelings of love, is a good choice in transcribing the important aspects of this genre. Here is an example of a kaikkilai poem from my translation, *There is also Rain.*

Kalittokai: 56

Has Brahma Made Her?

In the village where young *ka* grows,
close to the water channel,
a tiger claw stands casting dense shade.
Plaiting her hair with its flowers
she lets a few tresses dangle on her shoulders.
Her face has the look of a full moon
shedding sweet light
and who is she who comes
to the spot where I stand?
Is she the maiden made by an expert
in the Kolli Hills?
Has Brahma made her taking all the limbs
of beautiful women?
Or is it a devil in the form of a maiden
with hate towards men?
Let's examine this.

She is the daughter of a rich man
and slender like a climber,
has a jewel on her mound,
and a filigreed *kalingam*.
Let me engage her in talk:
"Good woman, listen!
You have the looks of a deer
and its beauty which makes
those who look at you fall in love with you.
You look like a feathered swan,
a peacock with its hen,
a stone-eating dove,
your gait, appearance and beauty
torment those who see it.
Are you aware of it or not?

With slender forearms, bright teeth,
jewels woven in fine fabric,
like a boat made out of bamboo
to cross the sea of desire,
you have soft shoulders.
Are you aware or not
that they torment the beholder?

Pretty woman,
your forearm has fine down,
the seasoned ironwood's young buds
are your nipples
sitting on your breasts shapely
like budding coconuts,
breasts seemingly made
of a dollop of rain cloud,
lush and youthful,
are you aware or not
that they take away the life of a beholder?

You walk away like someone giddy
without replying!
Do listen to what I say.
You are blameless.
Your family who allowed you
to move about are also blameless.
Like a killer elephant let loose
without making it known
to the people with drums,
it is the king who is to blame! (219-21)

Even in the first stanza, the girl's beauty evokes ambiguous signals in the hero's mind. Even as he praises her beauty, he has a moment of doubt whether her beauty is of a fatal kind: "Is it a devil in the form of a maiden / with hate towards men?" The hero invokes the doe, the swan, the peacock and a dove to sum up her beauty, a tribute most likely to produce a response from a mature woman. But his desperate compliments only leave her cold. She is a "vessel," built to cross "the sea of desire" but she is largely unaware of the effect she is producing on him which makes him even more personal and physical in his comparisons making him see "budding coconuts" and "ironwood's young buds." The word "bud" is the operative word to this situation indicating, without leaving anything to doubt, that the hero is in the throes of passion for a *young* girl. These overt sexual references may be surprising to a modern reader because poetry of antiquity is supposed to be conservative but one of the distinguishing characteristics of akam poetry is its sexual transparency. Kaikkilai and peruntinai poems, because they are portraits of love in its extreme manifestations, are more transparent than their akam counterparts. In spite of his cry of pain, "Are you aware or not/ that they take away the life of the beholder?" she walks away "without replying." The poor hero, unable to pin accountability either on the girl or her family "who allowed (her) to move about" blames the king for his misery! Just as a king should warn his citizens when a killer elephant comes to a public bathing place, he should warn with the help of drum-beaters the movement of this beautiful girl, so very fatal is her impact on men.

Another feature of kaikkilai is that it is a masculine monologue. It is masculine because the fate of falling in love with an immature person is destined to be the male's and naturally it is a monologue because the girl, in spite of her presence, does not offer a reply. If kaikkilai is merely one-sided love without the insertion of the age factor, there are quite a number of akam poems pleading the love of the heroine to the hero. Here is an example of one such poem from my translation of *Ainkurunuru*:

Make her your wife
Thozhi to thalaivan:

The lover of the female monkey
has a taste for tender leaves.
He thrashes the young rain cloud
on the broad rock
using the *naravam*.

Chief of this country,
even if you don't love her,
let her be known
as the wife of the mountain chief
on whose rock
the kino blooms.(157)

Delicacy prevents the thalaivi (the heroine) from making the plea herself so she sends her friend (thozhi) to speak on her behalf. The kino blooming on the rock tells the hero that even if his heart has become rock-like, love can still bloom there.

Peruntinai

Peruntinai literally means "a great or huge tinai." "Mismatched love" and "forced love" are some of the descriptions it has. Since "great tinai" is impossible to think of when it contains mismatched love, "huge tinai" alone accounts for the extremity of love situations it portrays. According to Prof. V.Sp. Manickam, "The function of peruntinai is to describe four kinds of excessive or intemperate behaviour of the hero and heroine of Aintinai." The four situations are:

On the part of the hero:

1. Actual riding of the matal horse when he is unable to secure the object of his love.

2. Protracted separation so as to lose the cream of youth without sexual enjoyment.

On the part of the heroine:

1. Pining away beyond consolation

2. Any venture resorted to by the heroine due to excessive lust. (141)

Mariaselvam, in a note on peruntinai, says: "*Par excessum*, i.e. mismatched, ill-assorted love, some even term it 'abnormal love.' " *Kalittokai* alone contains poems specifically marked as peruntinai. They are ten in number, from 138 to 147, and all of them by Nallantuvanar. Four among them are masculine peruntinai and six are feminine peruntinai. (109-110)

As riding the matal horse is a chief feature of peruntinai, it is better that one has an idea of what it is:

The custom whereby a frustrated lover rode a hobby-horse made of the fan-shaped leaves of the palmyra palm seems to have no parallel in other Indian literatures. The palm leaves were woven into the shape of a horse, and a jewel or jewels adorned its neck. The lover garlanded himself, usually with the *erukkam* (*Calotropis*). Holding in his hand a painting depicting himself and his beloved, he mounted the hobby-horse for everyone to see. As he came, people would realize the state of affairs between the lover and the girl and revile him. On occasion the hero would smear himself with ashes. From the fact that this practice figures in the *Tivviyapprapantam* it may be assumed that it also had a religious significance. This may have been a later development. (Marr. .27)

Though the woman may also suffer from excess love, the practice of mounting a matal horse is restricted to the male alone.

John Ralston Marr has translated *Kalittokai* poem 139 and which Nacchinarkiniar acknowledges as belonging to the genre of peruntinai:

"Good people, may you prosper! Good people, who always know how to lessen the burden of the sorrow of others by treating it as their own and who understand the virtue of so doing, since this is the duty of the good folk I want you to realize something. Like lightning amidst the rain a girl appeared and showed me her comeliness to comfort me. But then she did not follow the desire of my heart, and because of this I have been sorrowing. I have put on the fine chaplet woven of *erukku* flowers with those of a jewel-like cassia. I have mounted the tall dark hobby-horse of palmyra leaves so that its jewels rattled. As I 'rein in' the prancing hobby-horse I shall sing of the woman who was to assuage my affliction and to satiate my love-sickness so that it was in fact never assuaged!

Night and day waves of anguish beat upon me. I thought that if I mounted the hobby-horse it would at least be a raft upon those waves. But I was drowned in love's ocean because of that woman with her honeyed words!

This hobby-horse is a remedy for the confusion into which she has plunged me and will make unavoidable love-sickness avoidable.

The forces under the command of the god of love, in the form of this bejewelled woman's beauty, came and destroyed the defenses of my manliness. They saw my confusion and ridiculed it.

The hobby-horse has been sent to me by shy of the fair brow since I have lost my fierce battle against the love god.

My mind is captivated by loveliness of that girl whose sweet smile shows teeth pretty as white jasmine buds. Because of the pangs of love what remains of my blissful life is as burning embers within me.

This hobby-horse is the remedy against the one whose ornaments are fine; it will shield me from the flames of the fire of love.

Though you know all this you are still good people. Yours is the way whereby I may relieve my sufferings. Like the king who did penance in the way of renunciation and left the world to attain *Svarga*, so may I do. (25-26)

Riding the palmyra stem itself, in public, by an adult male, is a ridiculous practice. Covering oneself in ashes and a very lowly *erukku* garland are compounding the misery of the lover. The appeal is to the townspeople's

sense of pity and who would intercede on behalf of the young man to unite him with his ladylove. And if their efforts bear no fruit, the young man prepares to die by punishing himself with penance and renunciation.

Conclusions

Critics and scholars over the years have belittled these two types of love as subnormal love or abnormal love, fit only for the “slaves, servants and menial workers.” (Zvelebil. *Tamil Lit.* 42) There has been a consistent tendency to marginalize these poems. And it has taken various forms of suppression and sweeping under carpet. John Ralston Marr correctly identifies these impulses at work in the way the early scholiasts went about anthologizing the akam poems:

It is clear that those who compiled the Akam anthologies, perhaps influenced by Kaikkilai and Peruntinai lying outside the range of the tinai of normal love, either omitted poems descriptive of these situations or else classified them under one of the five tinai of normal love. Thus Nacchinarkiniar cites *Kalittokai* 58 as an instance of Kaikkilai. The poems of this collection are all grouped under one of the five tinai of normal love, and *Kali*. 58 occurs in *Kurinccikali*, ascribed to Kapilar.(24)

Using the parameters of excess love or physical union as one of the characteristics of peruntinai genre, a research scholar, N. Gayathri, has found the presence of peruntinai in almost all the akam anthologies of *Ettutokkai*. As for the age-old argument that these genres are fit only for the very ordinary folk, she puts up an effective defence saying that in matters related to heart, there cannot be any kind of elitism. (109)

Critics usually claim that because kaikkilai and peruntinai do not have an elaborate tinai description, they ought to be relegated to the margins. These two genres have no specific landscape nor do they have a specific season or time assigned to them. This denial, rather than making them less privileged, might in fact make them universally applicable. For instance, A. K. Ramanujan classifies most of European love poetry as either belonging to kaikkilai or peruntinai:

A great deal of Western love poetry would probably be described by the ancient commentators as the one-sided kaikkilai; a great deal of modern poetry, fiction and black comedy as love among the misfits or peruntinai – exploring the unheroic, the antiheroic, and presenting the ironies of impotence.(262)

It will be admitted that the greatest impulses for the production of erotic poetry, whether from the West or the East, have come from unconsummated love.

As an example of peruntinai, Marr quotes a poem from *Kuruntokai*, 17, which has all the features proper to it (26). But it has been classified as belonging to Kurinji tinai. A. K. Ramanujan has done an excellent translation of it and grouped it under the title “Poems in a Different Key.” (195)

What he said

When love is ripe beyond bearing
and goes to seed,
men will ride even palmyra stems
as if they were horses;

will wear on their heads
the reeking cones of *erukkam* bud
as if they were flowers;

will draw to themselves
the laughter of the streets;

and will do worse. (*Kuruntokai*: 17)

There is also a poem in the form of a conversation, between a hunchback woman and a dwarf man, which is not only hilarious in the way they are able to have a satisfactory physical union but it is the best example for “mismatched love.” But for reasons unknown it is a poem of Marutam tinai! (*Kalittokai*: 94). Another poem by

Kapilar narrates the attempt of an old, leprous brahmin to seduce a young girl even as she waits for the arrival of her lover in a night tryst. (*Kalittokai*: 65) And this one is a poem of Kurinji tinai. It is possible that the distortion in the grouping of kaikkilai and peruntinai by the anthologists is due to the explicit, even coarse, references contained in the poem to the body, the way the lovers unashamedly sought physical union and which, in general, have a carnivalesque humour. The intervention of the religious impulses which would become full blown with the arrival of the Bakhti or devotional movements were already at work in the lopsided way these poems have been classified. As Zvelebil says in *The Smile of Murugan*:

It also seems that some folk motifs and "vulgar" (<*vulgus*) trends forced their way into the classical erotic poetry, with rudimentary humorous and dramatic situations, with elements of farce and buffoonery: the poems, composed in this new tone, deals with affairs which are "common," "abnormal," "undignified," fit only for "servants and workmen; affairs which are fit for the ignorant, the uncultured. (119)

Kalittokai, being the youngest of the eight anthologies of *Ettutokkai*, would be marking a new direction in the evolution of classical Tamil literature, a sort of shift from the elitism of aintinai to a more democratic, people-oriented literature. This alone explains the presence of characters like the hunchback, the dwarf and the leper who would be unimaginable in the akam anthologies. The arrival of religious movements, the sublimation of sexual impulses into impulses of religious worship, could have unalterably changed the direction of the Tamil literary movement.

Tirukkural, a key text among the *Pathinen Keezh Kanakku* (the Lower Eighteen) collections has an entire adhikaram (Decad: 114) devoted to the discussion of the frustrated lover forced to mount the palmyra horse. Had it not been a significant practice in antiquity, with a considerable body of literature created around it, Tiruvalluvar would not have given this importance to it.

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