



**Recreating the Green Imaginarie through the
Environmental Aesthetics in the Akam poetry
of Illanko Atikal's Cillapatikaram**

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Abstract

Classical Tamil poetics contain within them an elaborate and extensive interplay between the natural and the human elements, which seem to co-exist and reflect in each other. This paper aims to map the different elements of nature and environment that the trope of Akam gives rise to in Classical Sangam poetry in Illanko Atikal's Tamil epic poem Cillapatikaram, or the Tale of the Anklet. The paper would like to contend that nature here serves not only as a mere literary device via which human emotions are expressed and personified but bears a more complex interrelation that unites the two elements without binarism, creating an eco-social zone where the two co-exist. Cillapatikaram, following the rubric created by Tolkappiyam, a guidebook of ancient Tamil literary arts, creates a highly detailed natural landscape with specific flora and fauna, presenting an organic relationship of natural elements with the human (Parthasarthy 286). This paper would like to briefly attempt the recreation of the ancient bio-ecological landscape, as created by the coded genres or tinais of Akam poetry. It concludes by extending the arguments of S. Murali, suggesting that in a re-envisioning of this environmental aesthetic in classical myths and epics, new greener imaginations can be revived, and the man-nature link reconfigured. It argues that the reconfiguration of detailed natural landscapes documented in the text has great ecological potential and can serve to enrich and rebuild the contemporary imagination of nature. Organically developed green imagination for the future's ecology in the context of the Indian sub-continent is unlikely to emerge from the Western modules, instead this paper attempts to make a case that

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the reconfigured ecology of the past can help present a more plausible landscape.

Keywords: Ancient Ecologies, Ancient Indian Poetry, Climate Change, Ecocriticism, Environmental Aesthetics, Literature.

Introduction

Classical Tamil poetics is marked by an elaborate interplay between nature and human life, where the two exist in mutual reflection rather than opposition. This paper explores the environmental and natural elements produced through the Akam trope in Classical Sangam poetry, focusing on their articulation in Ilanko Atikal's Cillapatikaram (The Tale of the Anklet). It contends that nature in the epic exceeds its role as a symbolic or expressive backdrop for human emotions and instead participates in a non-binary, interdependent relationship with the human. In accordance with the poetic principles laid down in the Tolkappiyam, Cillapatikaram presents a richly textured landscape of flora and fauna, emphasising an organic continuity between the natural and the social worlds (Parthasarthy 286). These natural elements form a system of correspondence where eco-systems become signifying sets. This paper attempts the recreation of the ancient bio-ecological landscape by utilising poetics in Cillapatikaram, as shaped by the coded genres or *tinais* of Akam poetry. It concludes by extending the arguments of S. Murali and Lawrence Buell, suggesting that in a re-envisioning of this environmental aesthetic in classical myths and epics, new greener imaginations can be revived and the man-nature link reconfigured. It argues that the reconfiguration of detailed natural landscapes documented in the text has great ecological potential and can serve to enrich and rebuild the contemporary imagination of nature.

The rich heritage of natural landscapes and elements of nature found in early Classical Tamil epics originate in guidelines that classify the different elements of Sangam poetry

in Tolkappiyam. The Tolkappiyam is the oldest surviving extant piece of Tamil literature that contains rules of grammar and the arts, dating back to 4th century C.E. (Takahashi 15). The chronology of Sangam poetics is not linear; it is very much possible that some of the main composite epic poems and literary pieces were penned before the conventions were laid out as they were developing in parallel. The third book of Tolkappiyam details the conventions of the art of poetry and divides poetry into two segments, the Akam and the Puram (Ramanujan, “Form” 197). The Akam strain involves the ‘feminine’ domain, dealing with the concepts of love and domesticity, whereas the Puram talks about heroic glory and war, the so-called ‘masculine’ realm. Within the rubric of Akam poetics, there is a complex relation between the natural elements and the human, including specific seasons, times of the day, natural landscape, flora, and fauna. The first element belongs to that of “time and place,” the mutal; the second is the karu, or the “native elements,” both of which interact with the final element of the sequence, the human element called uri, and vice versa (Ramanujan, Poems 237). Different stages of love, which are part of the human component uri, are evoked and represented through specific aspects of “natural” elements, i.e. the mutal and the karu. For example, the union of lovers, the ‘kurunji’ state, is always supposed to be represented in the dead of night, during the start of the cold season in the mountains. This is a unique tradition that has created a system of correspondences, or as A.K. Ramanujan puts it, “a whole language of signs,” where natural landscapes and eco-systems become signifying sets (Poems 241). The environment itself becomes intricately linked with human emotions and they gain semiotic equivalence.

All these different landscapes and their associated types of love are identified according to the dominant fauna; Tolkappiyam maps five major tinais or phases, Kurinji for union, Mullai for patient waiting, Marutam for sulking and unfaithfulness, Netyal for lamentation and anxious waiting, and

finally Palai, for separation from love or parents (Ramanujan, “Form” 205). These eco-zones, as various critics term it, are not merely limited to the expression of the biosphere but also indicate forms of social organisation. The natural elements do not contest with the human ones and the Western binaries between Man and Nature do not exist in ancient Tamil Poetics. For instance, in the following verse, poetess Avvaiyar illustrates the “eco-social and political impacts” of bountiful land:

As the ridge of field raises, its capacity to hold water will raise;

As the water capacity raises, the crops will grow well;

As the crops grow well, people will live a better life;

As people live a better life, the Kingdom will prosper;

As the kingdom prospers, the King

himself will rise to a great prosperity. (qtd. in Anamalai)

As all classical Tamil epics are supposed to, Atikal’s Cillapatikaram also comprises this complex taxonomy of interrelationships between humans and nature. These ‘eco-zones,’ as various critics term it, not only provide an in-depth glimpse of the natural world across various regions of South India but also reflect on the forms of social organisation (Parthasarthy 9). Tamil Sangam Literature can be considered, hence as one of the earliest ecocritical models in world literature (Nachiya 951). Mapping this is an important and essential project, as it has the potential to highlight a unique ecological space based on the state of the natural environment in Ancient Sangam period. While certain elements of this natural world have long perished and the dynamic between humans and the natural world has drastically changed, a recreation of this landscape (which can be brought into existence or re-created via

literary texts now), can be indispensable to provide a unique eco-critical understanding.

This paper will now elaborate on the tropes of Akam poetics in Tolkappiyam by tracing the different elements of nature and environment, and their corresponding tinai in Illanko Atikal's Tamil epic poem Cillapatikaram, or 'The Tale of the Anklet.' This epic poem was written approximately during the fifth century C.E, by a Jaina monk Ilanko Atikal and details the tragic story of Kannaki and Kovalan (Parthasarthy 5-7). This story was originally a popular Tamil mythological tale that Atikal adopted and converted to an epic poem set in the context and background of his contemporary cultural and political changes. The original myth is a love story ending in tragedy, where the perfect blessed couple Kannaki and Kovalan's relationship breaks apart when the latter falls in love with a courtesan named Matavi. Kovalan is subsequently falsely accused of a crime and executed; and Kannaki takes revenge against the injustice by ripping one of her breasts from her flesh and flinging it at the city which burns out. Atikal follows the genre configurations of the Tolkappiyam as he claims to have talked about "the five phrases of love and other kinds" in his work at the end of "The Book of Pukar" (Parthasarthy 106). Each stage of love in Akam poetics corresponds to a particular landscape, with a corresponding flora, landscape, time of the day and season associated with it, created as the paper mentioned earlier, a new system of signs and significations. A.K. Ramanujan provides a detailed charted table in his collected anthology of Tamil poems, which has been borrowed here for reference. Each individual author might alter some minute elements of this codification, depending on their particular local environments, and might also mix the different elements, engaging in a "fusion of tinai" to depict complex human emotions (Parthasarthy 286).

Table 1: Some Features of the Five Landscapes

	Lovers' Union	Patient Waiting, Domesticity	Lover's Un- faithfulness 'Sulking Scenes'	Anxiety in Love, Separation	Elopement, Hardship, Separation from Lover or Parents
Characteristic flower (name of region and poetic genre)	<i>kurin̄ci</i>	<i>mullai</i> (jasmine)	<i>marutam</i>	<i>neytal</i>	<i>pālai</i> (an evergreen tree)
Landscape	mountains	forest pasture	countryside	seashore	waterland (mountain or forest parched by summer)
Time	night	late evening	morning	nightfall	midday
Season	cold season early frost	rainy season	all seasons	all seasons	late frost, summer
Bird	peacock, parrot	sparrow, jungle hen	stork, heron	seagull	dove, eagle
Beast (including fish, reptile, etc.)	monkey elephant horse, bull	deer	buffalo freshwater fish	crocodile shark	fatigued elephant, tiger or wolf, lizard
Tree or plant	jackfruit bamboo, <i>vēnkai</i>	<i>konrai</i>	mango	<i>atumpu</i> <i>pungai</i>	<i>ōmai</i> cactus
Water	waterfall	rivers	pool	wells sea	waterless wells stagnant water
Occupation and people	hill tribes guarding millet harvest, gathering honey	ploughman	pastoral occupations	selling fish and salt, fisherfolk	wayfarers bandits

Table 1: The sign system of Akam poetry—Five landscapes and their corresponding uri, mutal and karu elements
(Source: Ramanujan, A.K., "Form in Classical Tamil Poetry" 205)

According to A. Mariaselvam, the uniqueness of the Akam poetics can be found in its detailed natural topography and biodiversity (116). As the paper furthers its elaboration of the different tinai, we see the rich natural environment of ancient Chola Kingdom emerge. The first phase of love, the Union of lovers, is called the 'Kurinci,' or the Kuringi tinai. The flower this phase of love is named after is a local one, Neelakurinji, and its habitat is very particular to the regions of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The Kurunji flower belongs to the genus *Strobilanthes*, with a blooming period ranging from four to 12 years that grows only in the Western parts of the Eastern Ghats (Chaudhary). There is no substitute for this flower in English, which leads to the translators often referring to it simply as the "blue flower," or "violet blue blossom," as it goes from blue to violet near the end of its bloom. The time of its bloom corresponds to the season the tinai assigns, near the end of the rainy season and early frost. This flower is referred to as the "rain flower" in the "The Round Dance of the Hill Dwellers," in Canto 24 of Cillapatikaram. The hill dwellers sing a song, describing their surroundings, the loud

waterfalls where the maidens bathe and the bounty of the hills on which they can survive happily, ending with a short interlude where a man from a neighboring village wants to marry the hill maiden (211). This union of the couple anticipates the union of King Cenkuttuvan, Atikal's brother for whom he penned this epic, with his queen.

Kannaki and Kovalan's union in the "Book of Pukar" also exemplifies the *Kurinji tinai*. On the day of their marriage, girls were dressed in finery, riding elephants to spread the news of the union. The moon was high in the sky, and they were married under the "bright star Arundhati" (Parthasarthy 27). The time of the day, the setting as well as the elements of flora and fauna come together to build this romantic scene of a grand union. A swarm of humming drones and bees enter the "lattice window" which is adorned with pearls and blue lotuses (29). Several outer plants, like the red and purple water lilies, screw pine, champak, matavi among others highlight this sensuous scene. As the lovers lie on the bed, the bees gorge on the flowers strewn around. Kovalan wears a jasmine wreath and Kannaki dons the red lilies; the wreaths themselves admitting to the desire that interlaces their bond.. The narrator accompanies this with divine praise of Kannaki's beauty where she is compared to peacocks, swans and a green parrot.

This theme, *Kurinji tinai*, is quite evident in other classical Tamil anthologies as well— for example, verses from *Ainkurunuru* (the 500 short poems) each belonging to a dominant *tinai*, detail the 'blue' hills or the 'sapphire' hills (Ramanujan, Poems 11). The *Kurinji* flower is often described in these classic texts as turning the hills blue, covering the vast expanse of the Ghats. A country girl speaks about her beloved, saying that "his mountain, that blue sapphire, is never out of sight" (13). The detailed environment— the aromatic mangoes of summer, green-skinned jackfruit, swaying bamboo that is used to make alcohol, the millet fields, jungle hens, deer and the

roaming elephants— is brought to life by the rich language of the verses (19). Unfortunately, we cannot often witness the wondrous sights described in these texts anymore as the hills where the flower usually bloomed have been taken over and converted into tea and spice plantations, erasing them from within the modern imagination (Chaudhary). They exist sparsely and within protected areas, unlike what is described in early Tamil poetry, where the hills are blanketed in blue, a thousand years ago.

Magade, citing Buell's seminal text *Writing for an Endangered World* (2003) talks about an "environmentally oriented" literature, where the author's interaction with nature is not a mere reflection or an observation, trying to "inspire awe or evoke deep emotional responses," but it is a more organic representation where the "human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest." The nonhuman environment in a way is often presented through the human centered lens, and Buell argues that it should not be a mere narrative or framing device. Human history should rather be "implicated in natural history" without the reinforced dichotomy (1208). This paper would like to posit that the tinais of Sangam poetry, following the trifecta of mutal, karu and uri, create unique eco-zones in their literary representation that do not inherently separate the human from the natural. The poetic codex's handling of the elements makes it clear that they consist of and impact each other; rather, the environment is intricately linked with the social and cultural organisational systems. The details that Akam poetry employs in recreating the environment and weaving in the myths and the folklore along with the human narratives can make a strong case that these narratives do not originate from the human perspective but they, following the poetic code, aim to represent the various elements of the environment together. For example, the people of the hills, the local tribals or the adivasis, in Canto 24 exist in harmony, not as an outsider to the eco-system, but as a constituent.

Though Cillapatikaram depicts all the five phases in detail, this paper will only cover a few of them in detail. In the “Book of Pukar”, Canto 4, “The Praise of the Evening,” Kolavan and his mistress Matavi’s story is introduced by a mythical framing of the Queen Earth missing her husband, the Sun. Atikal mixes in local folklore about the turning of the day to night; the setting sun is transformed into the Sun god who has been separated from his longing wife, the Mother Earth. The city of Pukar at this time is filled with mourning, where cowherds are playing the “ragas of parting” with their flutes and wistful wives separated from the husbands’ sigh in sorrow (41). Matavi, the courtesan, is waiting impatiently for her lover Kovalan, with her couch sewn full of mullai, or musk jasmine, which can be identified as the subspecies *Jasmiinum auriculatum*. Atikal sets the scene of the entire city and its surrounding landscape while introducing the Mullai tinai, before slowly moving into the bedroom, where Matavi is waiting in a pool of petals. When the lovers eventually unite, Matavi drowns herself in Kovalan’s presence, sometimes playfully quarrelling or burning with passion. The four corners of the Tamil kingdom are highlighted, as the lovers put out the “incense made of white resin/From the western hills and black agar/From the eastern” (42). They anoint themselves with the sandalwood paste from the southern mountains which they had ground on a lustrous flat stone from the northern caves. There is a bio-regional emphasis on this scene, where the different elements from the various landscapes and tinais intermingle, indicating that even though that the tinais are frameworks in poetry that create distinctions between various eco-zones, the actual elements of nature were more permeable in society.

The phrase of lover’s lamenting or anxiety in love, Netyal, is named after the *Nymphaea alba*, the Indian white lily according to some sources (Mariaselvam 116). Sometimes this flower is referred to as the blue lotus or the blue lily, making it closer to the *Nymphaea caerulea*, or the blue water lily. Both of these varieties of flowers are abundant on the coast and edges of

the Kaveri River in Tamil Nadu. The Netyal flower stands as a symbol of anxiety in love and is always accompanied by images of the seashore as the prominent landscape. Other flora, like the tiger claw tree (*Erythrina variegata*), more commonly known as the Indian coral tree, also features in this tinai (Ramanujan, Poems 39). The fauna was not only marked by the local breeds of fish, but dolphins, crocodiles and coastal birds.

Atikal presents the Netyal tinai in a unique way, Matavi and Kovalan sit on the seashore, happily in love, after the festival of Indra, singing love songs to each other. It is the content of the songs, about betrayal in love and lamentation, they are singing that occupy the theme of Netyal. With the use of brilliant literary interplay, Atikal substitutes the pain of the lovers in the songs to Matavi and Kovalan, who misunderstand each other in the duration of the singing and believe they have betrayed each other. Kovalan abandons Matavi, solidifying this theme. The original canto, “The Love songs of the Seaside Grove” begins with an atmosphere of festivity, but by the end, the desolate landscape of the seashore, transferred from the songs they were singing, serving as text-within-text, dominates. Matavi and Kovalan in their songs describe the great power and force of the river Kaveri as it merges with the Bay of Bengal. The city of Pukar, where the story is currently set, is located on the delta basin of Kaveri where most of the trade and livelihood of the people is based. The paper quotes a passage here to illustrate the description:

Conches with echoing lips,
Tossed about by the huge, swirling waves,
Swept and hurled on the shore,
Plow over and wreck the sandhouses sir,
Made by the girls on the wrinkled sand.

...

In the seaside grove thick with the odor of flowers
A girl keeps watch over fat, dried fish,

And pretends to drive the hovering birds away.
She holds a fetid cassia in her hand.
Round it hum and whirl a swarm of bees.
(Parthasarthy 67–68)

As illustrated from the above-cited example, the *uri*, or human element is seamlessly mixed with the *karu*, or the natural elements; the sandcastles made by little girls are getting swept by the ocean and the young girl drying fish in the seaside grove filled with water lilies. Again, narratives of women and descriptions of domestic activity dominate Akam poetics. These women and their activities seem to naturally co-exist with the order of the environment, whether it is the *adivasi* hill dwellers from the Kurunji *tinai* or the girl drying fish here. The long descriptive passages on the fierceness of the sea, the life of the fisher folk, the odor of drying fish, boats and nets, the scuttling crabs, the blue water lilies opening in the dead of the night all aid to create this beautiful landscape of the seashore. This is not simply idealised or romanticised, the hard work of the fishermen and the risks they take in the sea are not amiss but characterise the anxiety and the trepidation this genre offers. Critics have argued that it is this realism that Sangam poetry offers that, painting the picture of life and environment, make it so unique and popular (Gros 33). Similar harmonisation, where the *uri*, *mutal* and *karu* elements meet and interact, is displayed by almost every *tinai* of Cillapatikaram.

By tracing the different features of the Akam phrases of love with their corresponding bio-ecological elements, the paper wanted to recreate the natural ecology of the Ancient Tamil world. It depicted in detail the landscapes, along with their different components including the season, plants, animals and human interactions surrounding the landscapes. There is a set of rules laid by Tolkapiyyam, but the lyric poetry is more open-ended, for example, in several cantos of Cillapatikaram, we see the mixture of several *tinai*s. As illustrated, Akam poetry is not

a simple appropriation of nature and a mouthpiece for personified human emotions; it is more detailed than that. It engages in what Francois Gors describes as in-depth “realism”, creating detailed ecological landscape and imagery (32–33). The objects of nature become semiotic signs that dominate an entire array of human significations, as depicted in the Canto 24 of Cillapatikaram, the lovers who were not originally anxious, gain on the tone and emotion of anxiety by singing songs and physically being present in the netyal landscape. Apart from mapping the complexity of the ecological system and the natural relations human beings bear with the environment, since they are a part of the ecology not removed from it, the Akam poetry preserves the image of the natural landscape of ancient South India.

Thus, nature serves not only as a mere literary device via which human emotions are expressed and personified but bears more complications. They indeed serve as semiotic signs governing a field of human emotion at a mythological and literary level, but they give rise to a holistic environmental aesthetic, according to S. Murali, in his essay “Environmental Aesthetics Interpretation of Nature in ‘Akam’ and ‘Puram’ Poetry, which has been lost in the contemporaneity (161). He proposes that within the creation of the landscapes and stories within the system of Akam poetry we see the creation of a biosphere, where the human and the natural elements are intertwined and in natural progression (160). Murali interestingly uses postmodernist environmental ethics to defend his position and seems to suggest that a reconfiguration of modern environmental aesthetics is required. I will be extending his argument here, by suggesting that a re-envisioning and recreation of the environmental aesthetic present in ancient myths, especially that of Sangam poetry will enrich our own ‘green’ imagination and provide an alternative to break from the dominant Western way of perceiving environmental aesthetics and ecology. According to Arran E. Gare in his book,

Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis, there is a necessity to replace the grand Western narrative with “contextual discourse” that serves as a “bioregional narrative” (Gare 94). I argue that the Tamil Sangam poetry can achieve exactly this, by recreating its own dense and rich environment that contains unique biodiversity and ecological elements. These texts contain within them an environmental consciousness, that, as Lawrence Buell stated, does not create a binarism between the human and the non-human, but rather implicates them in the same world. Buell says that there is a need for the “reorientation of human attention and values” that makes the world a better place for both, taking in stride the anthropocentric concerns as well (6). There is a need for literature that is not merely eco-critical while enabling the distinction between the human and the non-human, but is conscious that the society needs to develop in a holistic way, where social organisation and environmental growth correlate proportionally. The Akam poetry can be a site where the recreation of the environmental landscapes is possible.

As we realised in the case of the Kurinji tinai and the dominant flower, the ancient Tamil world still contains landscapes that are unique and have yet to be mapped, and this is exactly where a new bioregional narrative can emerge. It becomes crucial to preserve these imaginative landscapes as the current environmental degradation and constant onset of ecological crises heralded by the post-industrialist capitalist world brings about a slow extermination of the local environment, especially the native flora species. This does not just amount to a mere physical elimination, but it is an extermination of an environmental aesthetic and eco-culture binding that region. For example, as mentioned earlier, the Kurinji flower of the hills possesses a unique bio-geographical marker—they grow only above thirteen hundred meters and are restricted to certain regions in the ghats. The flower and its synchronous blooming every 12 years have become a local

phenomenon, a connection that links the present to the ancient past, creating a seamless connection that has inspired more than the ancient Tamil poetics. The Paliyan tribe of hunter-gatherers in the southern Western ghats utilized the ‘12-year’ blooming phenomenon as a way to measure their age (Kielty). These very flowers now are at risk of being lost and have been declared as a threatened species under the IUCN Red list (International Union for Conservation of Nature).

Thus, it becomes abundantly clear that there is indeed a need to preserve not just the current ecology, but to recreate and restructure the lost ecologies from the past. The Akam poetry is but one site of evidence that provides extensive detail about the detailed natural topography and biodiversity of the past— and it is with a re-reading and popularising of these texts that we can bring back a kind of ‘green imagination.’ These sets of flora and fauna that were dominantly present in the past, characterising motifs in aesthetic theory and literature, create alternative imaginative landscapes that challenge the ecological coercion brought in by the ‘for-profit’ capitalist modules that aim to exploit natural resources. The bio-regional narratives can also be created by the revival of the ancient ecologies, and they are necessary for the multiplicity of narratives of nature to emerge that Arran E. Gare mentions. These “alternative thought systems in non-Eurocentric situations” are very much necessary for revival of greener imaginations so that the man-nature link can be reconfigured (Murali 162). A project to preserve and enhance our ecosystems can begin with a reconstruction of environmental aesthetics which I view as essential to ‘reimage’—a reimagining we very much require to not only preserve the local ecology that has yet to be destroyed but also reconstruct lost ecosystems. Moreover, while preserving the essence, this literature allows us to glimpse a world where the human and non-human distinction is not set in stone, which eco-critics like Buell argue is essential to the environmental imagination of the future. The paper would like to conclude by

saying that alternative sources of ecological imagination, apart from the dominant Western ones must be imagined, and Tamil Akam and Puram poetics, which possess a codified system to map the natural elements, should be recognised as important avenues that contain great eco-logical potential to reimagine an ancient era's green landscapes and enrich the contemporary imagination.

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