

# SOME *MARUTAM* POEMS IN TRANSLATION

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Tamil classical literature, also known as Sangam literature, is in fact ancient literature composed during the period between 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C and 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. The conventions it adheres to and its maturity of thought, language and the use of literary techniques suggest that it is preceded by many literary works lost to us today. Many possible reasons for this loss may be cited — like the oral tradition of the early poems, the easy destructibility of the materials used to write them on and natural disasters like the tidal waves (tsunami) mentioned in the Sangam poems themselves.

Sangam literary tradition divided land into five regions and named them after the most prominent vegetation of that region. They are the hilly region called *kurinci*. (strobilanthus kunthianus) the pastoral forests or fields named *mullai* (arabian jasmine) the agricultural tracts referred to as *marutam* (largestromia flosregina), the maritime belt known as *neytal* (nymphae lotus alba) and the arid desert region called *palai* (wrightia tinctoria). The appropriate season of the year and time of day was ascribed to each of these geographical divisions. Subject matter for poetry was divided into inner (*akam*) and outer (*puram*) dealing with love and other aspects of life, respectively. These are also related to the division of land and time mentioned above.

Of these, the aspect of love for the *marutam* region which is a region of plenty and where towns and cities were situated, is *utal* or the sulking of the wife, due to the husband's infidelity, either real or imagined. This therefore depicts a post-marital situation and brings out the wife's astute assessment of the situation and the various ways in which she reacts to it. These poems show the wife as the undoubted mistress of the house, capable of managing it and the many subordinates usually found in a wealthy household. If she has a weakness, it is her love for her philandering husband.

A very important convention in these ancient poems is the anonymity of the characters. They are not named. The main characters involved in these *marutam* poems are the *talaivan* (hero), *talaivi* (heroine) *toli* (the heroine's friend or confidante) the *parattai* (literally translated as the harlot, but in these poems may denote "the other women") *panan* (musician) and *pakan* (charioteer). Often the child of the hero and the heroine is also a silent, unintentional actor in this drama of love. If names are mentioned, they refer to some historical or famous persons who are in no way connected to the characters involved. The kings and chieftains mentioned in the *Akananuru* poem (No: 36) serve as good example. The Pandya king Nedunchelian defeated seven others- the Chera and Chola kings and chieftains Titiyan, Elini, Erumaiyuran, Irunko Venman and Porunan in the famous battle of Talalayankanam. The heroine says that the sound of gossip caused by her husband's infidelity is greater than that caused by the Pandya King's victory over the seven allies. Besides, the author of the poem being Nakkirar from Madurai, the Pandya capital, he takes the opportunity to record his king's victory.

This paper deals with five (5) poems from the *Akananuru* collection. As the name suggests, this work consists of 400 poems on the 5 different aspects of love. The poems are long with their length varying from 13 to 31 lines. Of the 23 poems of 13 lines 5 are *marutam* poems<sup>(1)</sup> while the longest one is also a *marutam* one<sup>(2)</sup>. This work is divided into three sections with very pretty names. *Kalirru-yanai-nirai* (A Row of Male Elephants) contains poems 1-120. *Mani-mitai-pavalam* (Rubies Interspersed with Coral) is made up of poems 121-300. *Nittilak Kovai* (A String of Pearls) contains the remaining 100 poems. These are published in separate volumes. Apart from this, the *Akananuru* is distinct with the uniform arrangement of the poems in all these three Sections.

1. All verses in odd numbers are *palai* poems.
2. Every second and eighth poem out of ten are *kurinci* poems.
3. Every fourth poem is a *mullai* poem.
4. Every sixth poem is a *marutam* poem.
5. Every tenth poem is a *neytai* poem.

This paper deals with five of the *marutam* poems (Numbers 16, 26, 36, 46 and 56)

These long poems use the literary device called *ullurai uvamam* in which objects of nature from the agricultural region are used as comparisons. But the comparison is veiled as in an allegory and form “suppressed similes”<sup>(3)</sup> or “implied metaphors”<sup>(4)</sup>. Once the parallels are understood, a few more details may be deduced.

## Poem No. 16

by Cākālā canār

What the heroine says to the hero who returns from the section of the town where harlots live but feigns innocence.

Our son, with  
Hands tender like the innermost petals (of the lotus) <sup>(v)</sup>  
that grows in the tank where otters live,  
Pretty lips like coral,  
Sweet words that cause laughter  
because of his unpractised tongue,  
Wearing gold bracelets  
And loved by all,  
(Played) alone on the street where chariots pass.  
Seeing him  
And noticing his resemblance to you,  
The sharp-toothed maiden approached him  
and thinking no one noticed  
Called him “come my life” and  
Clasped him with joy  
To her young breasts adorned with jewels.  
When I saw that, I stood still.  
(Then) hastening to her  
I embraced (her) and said,  
“Faultless Maiden! Why are you distressed? You are also a mother to him”  
She bent her head in shame  
Like a thief caught red-handed,  
And drew designs on the sand with her toes.  
Did I not treat her with courtesy  
O Chieftain of the agricultural tracts?  
She who resembles  
The rare beautiful goddess (Aruntati)<sup>(=)</sup> — of the sky.  
Is certainly fit to be your son’s mother.

<sup>(v)</sup>Literally, “ the inner petals next to the pollen”

<sup>(=)</sup> Also means afflicting or a demoness who kills by awakening lust.

Though the whole poem seems to be a description of what happened sometime back and the heroine's acceptance of the harlot as a co-wife, the actual emotion is evident in the sarcasm of the ambiguous last sentence. The term "*vanattu...arun katavul*" would naturally refer to Aruntati, the paragon of feminine virtues. This would suggest that the harlot was fit to be the hero's wife and the mother of his son. But the use of the word *ananku* shows that it is not Aruntati to whom she is comparing the other woman but to a demoness from the sky who can afflict by arousing only lustful longing. Which would lead to destruction - at least moral and financial.

## Poem No. 26.

by Pandyan Kanappereyil tanta ukkirap Peruvuluti

What the heroine, who has relented to the hero, said to her confidante (*toli*) who had earlier refused him entry into the house.

My Friend,

Is it possible to be angry with the chieftain  
of the district in which are fertile fields,  
where girls collect, during their play  
the dark flowers with white stems

(resembling fish-bones).

that have fallen from the round bunches  
of the *nir-mulli* with bent thorns,  
to use as decoration for their festivities?  
There was a time when he said,  
even during the day,  
"Do not stop me from embracing these (breasts)

—with black nipples  
and lovely as the ferruled tusks  
of the elephants that has split open  
the large doors of the fortress—

so that they press against my chest .

He would not let me leave him.

Neither will he leave me

But praise these breasts,  
even when I said, "Enough".

Now,

My gentle breasts, covered with beauty spots  
droop with sweet milk  
that prevents my son from thinking  
of anything else.

When I myself wished to embrace  
His broad chest smeared with sandal wood paste,  
so that my breasts fill with joy  
he was afraid that the sweet milk  
would stain his chest. Now I notice his arms  
that embraced me continuously, slacken.  
I looked at my son with his gentle walk  
in the arms of his foster mother  
and saying,

"You are suitable for your beautiful ones.  
I am suitable for this lovely son,"



Moved towards the child.  
Noticing that, he said  
"I too love him"  
and embraced me from behind.  
My heart melted  
like the oft-ploughed, fertile red soil  
that had received the cool, heavy showers;  
and went to him,  
deceiving my wisdom.

### **Ullurai Uvamam**

*nir-mulli* (water thorn; *hygrophila spinosa*) -- heroine  
Its flowers -- her heart  
girls at play -- hero diverting himself  
festival -- suggestion of his new marriage

Though the flowers bloomed on the *mullai* plant, it is of no use to the tree but are useful to the girls who have collected them for their play. They would discard them as soon as their games are over. Similarly the heart of the heroine, though within her is of no use to her for it has melted at the words and behavior of her philandering husband and has condoned his disloyalty.

## **Poem No. 36**

by Maturai Nakkirar

What the sulking wife said to the husband who returned after spending the night with the harlot.

O Lord of the flower-adorned country  
where the large male  
of the open-mouthed, many-striped *varal* fish,  
having swallowed the bent metal hook  
with the bait that came as Death itself,  
darted up

— tearing the tender leaves of the *ampal*  
destroying the many *kuvalai* buds just blooming  
and disturbing the beautiful, plaited *vallai* creepers—

and devastated the pond at dawn,  
resisting the pull of the angler  
like an angry bull being dragged by rope. !

They say,  
you married a maiden,  
with small bangles and dense, fragrant hair,  
in this park where many flowers bloom  
on the lovely tall *marutam* trees  
along the broad, sandy bank  
of the Vaiyai rich in fresh waters.

Celiyan with bannered chariots  
 pulled by horses with trimmed manes,  
 spread his fame  
 and brought to nought the greatness of seven (kings)  
 after reddening the wide area of Talaiyalankanam  
 in a day-long battle.  
 He captured the royal drums and white umbrellas  
 of the Chera and Chola kings,  
 the angry Tittan.  
 Elini wearing gold ornaments and owning war elephants,  
 chief of Erumaiyur, where toddy is filtered with palm fibre <sup>(1)</sup>  
 Irunko Venman with fragrant sandalwood paste  
 smeared on his fragrant chest  
 and Porunan with worthy chariots.  
 Then he performed the post-battle sacrifice.  
 The gossip (regarding your new union)  
 Is louder than the uproar  
 of his victorious soldiers after that battle.

<sup>(1)</sup> Fibrous web near the leaf-stack of palm tress (*pannatai*)

### *Ullurai Uvamam*

<i>varal</i> fish	—	the hero
baited fish hook	—	the sweet - talking musician or other go - between who introduced him to the harlot.
darting up	—	leaving the harlot's house unwillingly.
tearing the lotus leaves	—	saddening of the harlot's mother because of his departure.
<i>kuvalai</i> plant with flowers	—	the heroine with children.
<i>vallai</i> creepers	—	her relatives.
devastation of the pond	—	stirring up a scandal, thus dragging down family honour.

Thus the description of his district is a veiled reproach for his infidelity.

### **Historical Data.**

1. The poet Nakkirar from Madurai sings of the Vaiyai river that flows along the walls of the city. The Tirumarutat Turai is one of the bathing ghats along the banks of the river, near Madurai itself. Other Sangam works and the **Cilappatikaram** also sing of Tirumarutat Turai as a popular place near Madurai where people indulged in water-sport<sup>(5)</sup>. Its name is derived from the parks of tall **marutam** trees that provided shade and beauty to the area.
2. He also sings the great victory of the Pandya king Neduncheliyan and his famous victory at Talaiyalankanam in which he defeated the other two crowned monarchs- Chera and Chola and five allies of theirs in a single day. This victory is corroborated by other ancient texts<sup>(6)</sup> especially the **Purananuru** with five poems dedicated to him<sup>(7)</sup>.

3. Talayalankanam is also known as Alamkanam or Alamkatu. (*kanam=katu=* park or forest) meaning a park of banyan trees. It is identified as the famous place sacred to Siva<sup>(6)</sup>. Karaikkal Ammaiyar (3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D) has sung a *patikam* (a set of 10 verses) on Siva who is manifest there. Each of these verses have Tiruvalankatu as the last word. The eleventh verse which mentions the benefit of reciting the verses and the name of the author, concludes the *patikam*<sup>(9)</sup>. This scared place has been celebrated by Tirunanacampantar (7<sup>th</sup> Century) and Cuntarar (late 7<sup>th</sup> to early 8<sup>th</sup> Century)<sup>(10)</sup>. To the Saivites it is also the place where Siva as Lord Nadaraja danced the *Urttuva Tantavam* at the gem-studded hall of Ratna Sabai.

## Poem No. 46.

by Allur Nanmullai

What the *toli* said to the hero when he sought permission to enter the house.

O Lord of the country  
 where the red-eyed buffalo  
 disliking its muddy shed,  
 breaking its strong leash at night  
 when the village sleeps,  
 removing with its horns  
 the thorny fence (of the fields),  
 agitating the fish in the fields full of water,  
 disturbing the *vallai* creepers,  
 that have pretty floral tubes,  
 eats the dew-filled lotus around which bees hum!  
 Who are you for us to be angry with?  
 They say,  
 you brought to our house and married  
 a woman with long, dark tresses  
 brighter than falling rain. (clouds).  
 Long may you live, O lord.  
 We do not say thus.  
 Let the bright bangles loosen  
 and slip off from my\* lovely upper arms  
     — resembling Allur of paddy - wealth  
     belonging to the victorious Celiyan  
     with the bright sword that kills,  
     scattering the enemies' elephants in battle.  
 Go (where your wish), O lord!  
 Who stops you?

\* The heroine's friend (*toli*) often identifies herself with the heroine and speaks of the heroine's sorrow as her own.

### Ullurai Uvamam

buffalo	—	hero
leash	—	sense of shame or <i>decorum</i> ( <i>nanam</i> )
muddy shed	—	home or normal place of residence.

fence	—	<i>panan</i> (musician) and <i>virali</i> (the female singer or dancer), who have to be dealt with, before meeting the harlot
horns	—	wealth
fields	—	section of the town where harlots live
fish	—	friends of the harlot
<i>vallai</i> creeper	—	the harlot's mother
lotus at night	—	the harlot who receives him, not out of love, but for wealth
humming of bees	—	music

### Historical Data

The poetess Nanmullai, with the suffix *nan* added as a mark of respect is from the place called Allur. This place rich in paddy, belonged to the Pandya kings who are also referred to by the title Celiyan.

### Poem No. 56.

by Maturai Aruvai Vanikan Ilavettanar.

What the heroine said to her friend.

It makes me laugh, My Friend.  
 This is the country of cool water-fronts  
 where the buffalo,  
 with black horns as if made of iron  
 agitates the crystal - clear pond,  
 tears the tender leaves of the *ampal*  
 eats many flowers of the blooming *kuvalai*.  
 Then with the fine pollen of the *kanci* tree  
 that grows on the river bank  
 falling on its wet body, it enters the shed, chewing cud.  
 The Musician,  
 Desirous of uniting the chief of this district  
 —who wears garlands on his firm chest  
 and is suitably adorned —  
 with a new woman, passed by along this road  
 and was chased by a cow  
 that had just delivered its calf.  
 Out of fear he dropped the lute,  
 and ran into our house.  
 When I saw that,  
 I hid the joy that shook my body  
 and going up to him, said,  
 "This is not the house, that is yours".  
 Seeing me and himself  
 he stood with a confused mind  
 and hands held (together) in salutation.



**Ullurai Uvamam**

humming of bees	-	music
buffalo	-	the hero
pond	-	village
<b>ampal</b> leaves	-	mothers of harlots
<b>kuvalai</b> blooming or just opening	-	new young harlots
pollen of <b>kanci</b> on the buffalo's back	-	his flirtations with their maid -servants
chewing cud	-	relishing his dalliances.
shed	-	the usual place of residence.

The hero is neither conscious of his home nor penitent for his past disloyalties. He still remembers with relish his extra-marital associations and has come back to his house only out of habit. The musicians-male or female- are often close associates of harlots and usually act as go-betweens.

These poems show clearly the existence of prostitution and polygyny (ie polygamy in which a man has more than one wife). There was no religious sanction nor necessity for this situation. Neither was it universal for there were men who considered such behaviour dishonourable as suggested by a poem by the Chola king Nalankilli who vowed that if he failed to defeat his enemies, he might as well be doomed to spend his time with women who had no love in their hearts. This suggests that society considered the company of these loveless women as a misfortune or calamity. However, the poems dealing with this aspect of love abound in **ullurai uvamam** in the lines describing the landscape or district.

**End Notes**

1. Poems No : 10, 23, 59, 61, 76, 80, 92, 106, 146, 165, 185, 196, 228, 247, 281, 284, 324, 326, 341, 342, 344, 380, 382.
2. Poem No. 86
3. Varadarajan M, The Treatment of Nature in Sangam Literature. Madras, 1957, p63.
4. Meenakshisundaram. T.P Tolkappiyar's Literary Theory in Proceedings of the First International Conference- Seminar of Tamil Studies. Vol II Kuala Lumpur 1969, p6.
5. Kalittokai 26:13, Paripatal 7:80, 22:45 Cilappatikaram 14:72
6. Maturaikkanci 127-129, Netunalvatai 188
7. Purananuru. 17,23, 72, 76, 371
8. ibid U.VE Caminathaiyars's commentary Madras 1956, p610
9. Tirumurai II. Karaikkal Ammaiyar Padalkal
10. Vellai Varanar; Panniru Tirumurai Varalaru. Pt. 1. Annamalai 1962, p204-309
11. Kalyanasundra(?), Tiruvalankattup Puranac Curukkam. p22-27 (Bibliographical details not available)
12. Purananuru. 7:9-14



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- Nittiliak- Kovai  
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