

## Peruntinai as the Parody of Aintinai

M Nazir Ali

ORCID: 0000-0002-5152-9751

### Abstract:

Peruntinai, which means a great or huge aspect of human love, poses quite a number of contradictions: the very few number of poems which fall under this genre and the kind of profane love it talks about make one doubt whether the name was given in jest or irony. The *Tolkappiam*, the text of grammar and poetics of classical Tamil, identifies it as the third dimension of love, next to *kaikkilai*, one-sided love and *aintinai*, the esteemed love of the five major landscapes. Using the theoretical stance of the *Tolkappiam* and the actual peruntinai poems in the *Kalittokai*, this paper analyses the *raison d'être* of peruntinai and reaches the conclusion that it parodies as well as complements the aintinai. Its intention is to invert and subvert the aintinai values in order to create aesthetics of its own.

**Keywords:** peruntinai, *Tolkappiam*, *Kalittokai*, parody, polysemy

Offering the features of peruntinai, the *Tolkappiam* says in Akattinaiyal:

*Yeria mataltiram ilamai teertiram*  
*theruthal ozhintha kamattu mikutiram*  
*mikka kamattu mitalotu tokaich*  
*cheppia nankum peruntinaik kurippe* (Verse 54)

This is how a modern commentator renders it:

1. Mounting the palm horse as expression of frustrated love by the thalaivan.
2. Depletion of one's youth without experiencing sexual pleasure and so indulging in it in one's old age.
3. Becoming overwhelmed by lust and lacking sobriety.
4. Lustful acts which are in dissonance with the propriety of aintinai. (Kesikan 268)

Paraphrasing it slightly differently, Indra Manuel says:

Tolkappiar included peruntinai as one of the seven Akattinai. He does not define it but lists four types of it – the actual riding of the *matal horse*<sup>1</sup>, indulging in pleasure even after the passing of youth, excess love which cannot be satisfied and certain themes which violate the superior kind of love. (584)

Commentators interpret this as occurring in such situations:

- The thalaivan may be much older than the thalaivi
- The thalaivi may be much older than the thalaivan
- Both of them may be old but still entertain lustful thoughts and carry them out.



Poet: Orampokkiar

When the dwarf turns out to be quite persistent in his sexual demand, the annoyed hunchback utters a series of expletives:

You whelp born to a man-faced owl,  
how dare you stop us to say  
you want us?

Compare this caricature of a man with the romantic hero the *Kurinchippattu* describes:

His hair was curly  
with the long rub of oil.  
Having rinsed it with sandal  
he had finger-combed it  
to take away the tangle and moisture (Ali, *Collected Poems* 257)

Poet: Kapilar

He serenades the thalaivi and her thozhi complimenting their beauty:

“Women with beautiful hair!  
...  
Let me feast on your beauty”

In contrast, the dwarf and the hunchback trade insults:

your waist is higher  
than your head, your face a stork,  
plucked and skinned,  
with a dagger for a beak.

The woman retorts:

You dwarf, standing piece of timber

Gone are the carefully marked seasons and the times considered ideal for romance:

At high noon  
you come to hold  
our hand and ask us to your place

The deliberately introduced deformities are not restricted to their physical asymmetry alone but spreads to further inversions in language and seasons. And with it goes any subtle wooing one finds in the aintinai poems, replaced by urgent craving for bodily satisfaction:

If I take you in the front, your hump  
juts into my chest; if from the back  
it'll tickle me in odd places.

This is in total contrast to the lines spoken by the thalaivan in the *Kurinchippattu*, taken to be the very epitome of superior akattinai values.

When the dwarf proposes an unusual coital position, the lady is enraged.

What is so wrong

with us, you ball, you bush of a man.

No amount of swearing is going to dissuade the man from satisfying himself and finally he is able to breach the woman's reserve:

Come now, let's find joy.

You in me, me in you.

But he has enough discretion not to do it in the open and make themselves laughingstock to others, so takes the lady away to the privacy of "wild jasmine bush" to "finish the unfinished." Though the poems of the aintinai can be frankly physical (this is in fact one of the features of classical Tamil love poetry), they are nowhere near this peruntinai poem in being totally carnivalesque.

There is another poem in the *Kalittokai* (65) composed by Kapilar, again in the form of a dialogue when poems were written as monologues or interior monologues, in which the actors are a young woman waiting for a secret tryst with her lover and an old brahmin. The old lecher attempts to seduce her which she evades, in a hilarious scene, by pretending to be a she-devil (Ali 239-40)

With the *Tolkappiam* constructing an elaborate poetics exclusively devoted to aintinai, and a large body of poems celebrating it, why should there be a smaller body of poems and a theory which contradict and parody the nobler love? Though the *Tolkappiam* is careful enough to earmark these two genres of poems, kaikkilai and peruntinai, for the sub-strata of society, it recognizes the fact that even the ruling class (the *thalai makkal*) were capable of such acts and decided to provide an outlet for the purely physical and carnal, in the same way the carnivalesque atmosphere provided an outlet for the energies bound by the strict moral codes of society. Since such acts cannot be seen as taking place among the men and women of nobler classes, it deliberately introduced them between the hunchback and the dwarf, their physical deformity calculated to be an index of moral depravity. The one figure who comes closest to being a peruntinai actor in the world of aintinai is the *parattai*, the mistress or the concubine, who is constantly sniped at by the thalaivi and the thozhi for enticing the thalaivan away from his wife.<sup>iii</sup>

Mounting the palmyra horse, or what is known as *matal erutal* and *matal urutal*, is an important feature of peruntinai. It expresses frustrated love. Elaborating on this practice, Marr says:

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 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, the 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. (27)

There is a separate turai called *kudirai maram* whose subject matter is the bravery and majesty of the mounted soldier (Kesikan, *Purananuru* 320-21). Riding a palm horse in imitation of riding the real one shows the driving impulse of parody in peruntinai. It is a mockery of love, an indication of the degradation that it can plunge the lover. The two more acts of the lover carry this impulse as far as it

can go. Flowers have always had a special role to play not only in the romantic landscape of akattinai but also in the purattinai or the exterior of Tamil life, which mostly consists of acts of bravery. The five landscapes of sea, river, mountain, forest and desert are designated by the flowers prevalent there and the flowers worn by the soldiers in the war conveyed the nature of war fought.<sup>iv</sup> In the hierarchy of flowers the *erukkam* or milk weed, with its sickly look and bad smell, occupies the lowest rank and wearing it is highly symptomatic of the condition of the lover. The painting of himself and his ladylove, which he carried aloft, is more of a caricature than an actual painting, implying their union is possible only in such parody.

The subtitle that Ramanujan has given his translation of the poem “The Hunchback and the Dwarf” is “A Dialogue.” For those who are aware of the narrative conventions of akam poetry, it is significant because akam poetry is almost made up of monologue or interior monologue. The dialogic form of a peruntinai poem invites repartees, rapier thrusts of wit or invective, and more importantly, in terms of literary forms, opens the door to the dramatic art. It kindles debate and makes itself susceptible to polysemy. The dialogue shown as taking place between menials and maids allows the reader to enjoy the play of subversive ideas at one remove. In other words, he can witness every sanctified aintinai norm being parodied or thrown to winds while remaining untouched himself.

Given the small number of poems<sup>v</sup> and its unusual handling of erotic matters, peruntinai, which means great tinai, may seem to be a misnomer. A. K. Ramanujan reasons that Tolkappiar might have given this name to this slim body of poems because “Peruntinai (is) the ‘major type’ depicting the common human condition, love among the misfits with no scruples regarding the niceties of time or landscape; moving from mockery to coupling in the course of a conversation” (260). A more charitable view would be the democratization of literature, a move away from the elitists towards the masses and from *being* the poetry of rigid conventions to the *becoming* of comedy and drama.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>i</sup> Even the *Tirukkural*, part of *pathinen keezh kanakku*, has one whole *adhikaram* (114) devoted to it, making it clear that the practice of mounting a palm horse as expression of frustrated love persisted down the post-Sangam period also.

<sup>ii</sup> There seems to be a deliberate attempt to classify poems which are decidedly peruntinai as belonging to the aintinai category. Refer Marr’s comments (24) on this.

<sup>iii</sup> *Vayil maruttal*, which literally means refusal to open the door, was the way the thalaivi punished the thalaivan returning from the mistress.

<sup>iv</sup> For a detailed discussion of the flowers refer Zvelebil’s *The Smile of Murugan* 97-100.

<sup>v</sup> Nacchinarkkiniar groups only ten poems of the *Kalittokai* under peruntinai.

## Works Cited

Ali, Nazir M. Trans. & Ed. *There is also Rain: Collected Poems of Kapilar*. Authorspress, 2016.

----. Trans. & Ed. *Classical Tamil Love Poetry: Ainkurunuru or Five Hundred Short Poems*. Partridge India, 2013.

----. “The Deviant Loves of Classical Tamil Love Poetry.” 12 Dec.2017.

[www.academia.edu//The\\_Deviant\\_Loves\\_of\\_Classical\\_Tamil\\_Love\\_Poetry\\_26317553](http://www.academia.edu//The_Deviant_Loves_of_Classical_Tamil_Love_Poetry_26317553).

Ilampurananar. Ed. *Tolkappiam: Porulatikaram*. Saratha Pathippakam, 2016.

Kesikan, Puliyur. Ed. *Purananuru: Thelivurai*. Parry Nilayam, 2009.

----. Ed. *Tolkappiam (Muzhuvatam): Thelivurai*. Parry Nilayam, 1964.

Manuel, Indra. *Literary Theories in Tamil*. Pondicherry Institute of Linguistics and Culture, 1997.

Marr, John Ralston. *The Eight Anthologies: A Study in Early Tamil Literature*. Institute of Asian Studies, 1985.

Nacchinarkkiniar. Ed. *Kalittokai*. Saiva Sithanda Noorpathippu Kazhakam, 1962.

Ramanujan, A.K. Trans. *Poems of Love and War*. OUP, 1999.

Varadharasanar, Mu. Ed. *Tirukkural*. Saiva Sithanda Noorpathippu Kazhakam, 1949. Rep.1998.

Zvelebil, Kamil. *The Smile of Murugan: On Tamil Literature of South India*. Brill, 1973.

*M Nazir Ali is an Associate Professor of English, Kanchi Mamunivar Centre for PG Studies, Puducherry. He can be contacted at mnaziali@gmail.com*