

The Gendered Nature: *Tiṇai* and the Creation of Identities

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Abstract

There have been numerous attempts to reconstruct the creation of masculine and feminine ideals ever since the great paradigm shift in the 1970s with the rise of feminist scholarship worldwide; however, the subject remained a terrain of continuous exploration and reformulations. Unlike existing literature on gender, this paper extends its gaze beyond the human realm and will shed light upon the contributions of non-human protagonists to the construction of gender ideals in early Tamilakam. While the division of gender and sex is demarcated clearly in the human case, in the context of non-human animals, the categorisation of gender is complex. How do we then use the non-human animal category to construct feminine and masculine ideals of humans? We believe that blurring boundaries between human and non-human realms prompts a re-evaluation of traditional frameworks, compelling us to reconsider a few existing theories.

*Against this backdrop, the present paper analyses the concept of *tiṇai* (five eco-zones) to reconstruct gender ideals that existed in early Tamil society. *Caṅkam* literature constitutes the primary source for the study. Based on the literary as well as archaeological explorations, the essential characteristics of the society during this period are understood as a militaristic one expanded to neighbouring regions that idealised heroism and performed various rituals related to war and victory. Within this socio-cultural context, these eco-zones are portrayed as five distinct realms, each imbued with its unique physiological essence, serving as a metaphor for the emotional landscape of the characters, and this sets the backdrop for the tales of love, longing, and sorrow. The paper expands its purview into the Tamil notions of love and marriage using various kinds/forms of animal imagery. Sources have shown that an adult male was supposed to serve the ruling class upon attaining a certain age, and women were married off when they were still at a tender age. The treatment of these categories was never equal; however, in most instances, they were imposed with the responsibility of upholding the community's pride. Be it a man fighting on the battlefield or a woman reaching the marriage age. The paper will conclude with a discussion on the role of flora and fauna in the creation and propagation of gender ideals that contribute to a gendered understanding of nature.*

The relationship between human beings and nature needs to be studied beyond the theory of evolution, where the environment is more than just a background to understanding specific contexts. Often, conventional views of history place humans in a privileged position where history is only about their ideas, creations, acts of courage, conquests, etc., and non-human animals are given a trivial position. There have been a few studies that have highlighted human-nature interactions by factoring in how humans engaged positively with nature over time. They have emphasised environmental, ecological, ethical and even philosophical aspects of these engagements and have been critical in constructing the non-human world.ⁱ At the same

time, many have posed concerns over how humans assume a community of thought and feeling between themselves and a wide range of animals and plants and have warned about the chances of high self-absorption in such studies. Tracing this ‘disconnected’ yet interwoven relationship will be exciting. One of the ways human-nature relationships can be studied is through the representation of nature as to how humans have perceived, utilised, or even exploited this ‘co-existence’ to symbolise, propagate, and validate human norms and practices. To this purpose, I have chosen early *Tamiḷakam* as the region of study. I will particularly look at the concept of *tiṇai* to understand the creation of gender identities as revealed through the literature they produced.

Tiṇai: An Introduction

The tradition of associating a region with a particular behaviour runs across the literary style of early Tamils. Many of the early enquiries into this tradition couldn’t form a coherent understanding as to why *tiṇai* was significant in *Caṅkam* poems. However, few of them tried such sociological enquiries into literature.ⁱⁱ It is understood as one of the major tools through which the *Caṅkam* compositions were reconstructed. It has also been viewed as the physiological division of the early Tamil region, divided majorly into five, known as *aintiṇai*. The concept has been instrumental in decoding the poems, especially the *akam* ones. Each of these eco-regions has been associated with particular behavioural patterns and evokes particular emotions. The poems have been talked about as having a speaker and a listener, and each *tiṇai* is considered appropriate for the conduct of a particular course of love, like *kaḷavu* (pre-marital) or *karpū* (post-marital) and so on. Although the author of *Tolkāppiyam* does not clearly define the term, later commentators of the text, such as Ilampuraṅār (13th century) and Nacciṅārkkīṇiyār (15th century), categorically defined the term *tiṇai* as “general theme or content” and “behaviour or conduct” of *Caṅkam* poems respectively.ⁱⁱⁱ *Tolkāppiyam* accords each *tiṇai* as having their respective deity, trees, animals, drums, musical instruments, diet and occupation, and each of these is credited with preferences of certain forms of poetry and stages of love.^{iv}

K Sivathamby, in his study of *tiṇais*, agreeing fundamentally with scholars who have advocated for a non-linear evolution, talked about *tiṇais* as exhibiting complex socio-economic evolution. For instance, the inclusion of *pālai* in *aintiṇai* is ascribed to a later period with the drying up of *mullai* and *kuriñci* and having resulted in the new geographical formation.^v On the contrary, Selby has argued that the rhetoric of the *Caṅkam* poets aims to weave a shared

domain of the individual's inner landscape and the geophysical ambience through the device called *tiṇai* and has argued for a seamless continuity between the emotional and ecological elements. Can we then take the *tiṇai* division at its face value as referring to eco-zones, or should we consider them literary tropes?^{vi} Studies focused on economic aspects of *tiṇais* largely concentrated on *marutam*, the fertile agricultural tract developed along the fertile river valleys of Tamil Nadu. What is central to our study is whether these eco-zones exhibit any gender ideals; if yes, how do we understand the emotions these zones have already been identified with? An exploration of *tiṇai* in the light of gender will be interesting.

Aintiṇais and the Semiotics

As we have already discussed, the different eco-zones and their distinct characteristics set the backdrop for the tales of love, longing, and sorrow. These eco-zones are portrayed as five distinct realms, each imbued with its unique physiological essence, serving as a metaphor for the emotional landscape of the characters. *Kuriñci*, the mountainous region, stands as the place where lovers unite in the pre-marital union of *kaḷavu*. It is here that their love blossoms amidst the peaks, setting the stage for the commitment of love and marriage. Now, who were the characters of these poems? We tend to attribute the heroes and heroines of *akam* to the ordinary people who lived in the countryside. However, there is no consensus among historians regarding the composition of these people. Kailasapathy has argued that “The heroes of the love poetry were also kings, for it would not pay to sing about the lives of the poor”^{vii}. While saying this, the scholar also admits that there are exceptions to this rule. Poems dealing with the theme of *ēru taḷuvutal* (subduing the bull), a custom that prevailed among the *Āyar* community, is one such exception. In these rituals, it is said that the young girls of the community preferred to marry young men who subdued wild bulls in a contest. It is said that men who possessed numerous cows were good at subduing rapid bulls and adorned themselves with garlands woven with flowers gathered from mountains and forests. These include delicate clusters of *konṟrai*, tender *kāyā*, small-leaved *veṭci*, *kuruntham*, *kōdal* and *pāngar*. The women, known for their good speech and possessing large, moist eyes, embellish themselves with vibrant, beautiful earrings. Their teeth resemble budding *mullai* flowers and the tips of peacock feathers as they stand on elevated platforms.^{viii} Several poems on these lines, in the *akam* genre, despite falling under the love poems, have become the stories of chiefs and kings. Often, the heroes of the love poems were rulers, and ordinary people rarely got the opportunity to participate in war.^{ix}

Each of the eco-zones has been attributed with emotions of various kinds. V. Selvakumar has equated these five ecozones with the ‘cultural spaces’ constructed and transformed by humans. He argues this micro eco-cultural landscape, constructed as part of poetic conventions but based on real-life situations, although they might not reflect the absolute reality, “they do reveal the ability of the composers to develop an abstract perspective of culture, environment and landscapes based on a real-life situation.”^x Here, *marutam*, the fertile agricultural land, serves as a stage for *Talaiva*’s visits to his mistresses and becomes the backdrop where *Talaivi*’s sorrow takes prominence in the poems. The heroine here is distressed about her husband’s infidelity. Ōrampōkiyār graphically describes one such poem about the sorrow of *Talaivi*. Here, the heroine speaks of the *Talaivaṇ* to be from a town with shores where reeds on the riverbank blossom like sugarcanes. She ponders whether she will be able to tolerate his cruelty. Her curved, thick, delicate arms have become thin due to sorrow. The symbolism of reeds blossoming like sugarcanes indicates the concubines he is attracted to, suggesting his inability to distinguish between true sweetness (sugarcane) and mere appearance (reeds). This metaphor reflects his confusion and lack of discernment in recognizing genuine affection of his heroine and that of concubines, as he is swayed by superficial allure rather than true love (*karai- icer-veḷam*). Despite attempts to conceal her sorrow, she feels betrayed by her body. Sometimes, *Talaivi* is shown as stressed because her hero delays returning home as he is busy earning wealth.^{xi} This implies the unhappiness of the heroine in her husband’s pursuit of sexual adventures out of his house.

Mullai, the lush pasture land, becomes a reflection of monsoon season, mirroring *Talaivi*’s eager anticipation from distant places as she yearns for the return of her lover from far of places. The conventional poetics of this *tiṇai* represent the separated lovers and their minds and the ultimate reunion. Oftentimes, the descriptions of *Talaivi*’s distress, the loss of her beauty and the gradual reclaiming of it after their reunion have been the subject of numerous poems. Poets mostly employ animals as well as other symbols of nature to describe situations of these kinds. Pēyanār, in a poem, talks about how the foster mother was extremely happy seeing the *Talaivi* being finally united with her husband. The poet used beautiful animal imageries to explain the situation; it says that observing them lying together with their son in the middle was truly heartening, resembling a family of a stag and a doe with their fawn. The foster says it’s a rare sight in this vast world surrounded by the ocean and the sky.^{xii}

Coming to the next *tiṇai*, *neytal*, the coastal land, is a realm filled with secrets, underground meetings, and *kaḷavu*, the erotic encounters before marriage. The meetings

happen in the daylight (*pagar-kuri*) and at night (*iravuk-kuri*). The arid expanse of *pālai* symbolises the desolation and sorrow experienced during the summer months. The parched earth becomes a visual metaphor for the emotional drought experienced by the lovers, separated not only by physical distance but by emotion, too. The feeling of sorrow is depicted both before and after marriage, serving as a recurring motif that intensifies the emotions within the poetry. *Tiṇais*, thus, with their distinctive characteristics, serve as a canvas upon which the stories of love and sorrow are built and survive. Each of these *tiṇais* discussed above has its animals, birds, plants, trees and flowers. *Akam* especially is impersonal in the sense that there is a convention of not naming the actors; they are being identified on the basis of the region (*ūran*, *turavan*) or by their profession (*uḷavan*, *uḷatti*) or else by their gender (*naṁpi*, *sirumi*).^{xiii}

Let us now focus on one of the significant category human beings employed to propagate their ideals of gender and identities- the animals, and how *tiṇai* has served as an important telescope through which we interrogate these categories.

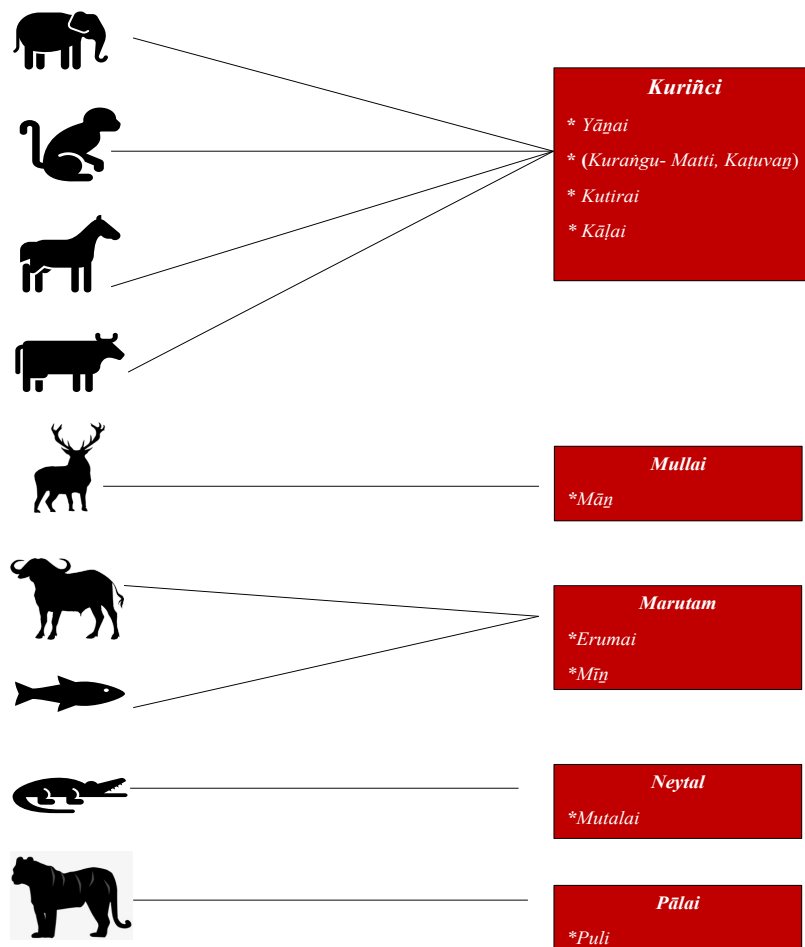


Plate I. *Aintiṇais* and their respective animals, majorly reproduced from A.K. Ramanujan and Zvelebil, and Sivathamby, is not to be taken as the complete list of animals which appear in the poems but includes most frequently found references. There are overlaps, and these cannot be taken as indisputable categories.

The Animal Allegories: *Caṅkam* Notions of Love

Sources have shown the early Tamil society's expectation of an adult male and female to an extent. Men are supposed to serve the ruling class upon attaining a certain age, and women are married when they are still at a tender age. The treatment of these categories was never equal; however, in most instances, they were imposed with the responsibility of upholding the community's pride. Be it a man fighting on the battlefield or a woman reaching the marriage age. *Akam* genre is filled with depictions of women longing for their partner, their secret meetings and a series of events that lead to their elopement. The restrictions on her mobility were connected with the idea of *karpū*, which the early Tamils held with utmost significance. For instance, *Akanāṇṭṭu* poem number 7 restricts the movement of a girl who has just reached puberty. She has been warned by her mother not to go outside of her house as dangers await there. The mother says,

“I told my daughter; your clothes are made of cool leaves, your breasts are big, your sharp teeth shine, and the hair on your head has grown abundantly. Do not join your friends who wander and go everywhere. There are fierce gods who attack in this ancient town. You are under strict guard. Do not go near the front gate. You are not ignorant. You are an intelligent young woman who is not naive any longer. You have gone past your childhood years.”^{xiv}

This shows the conditioning women had to go through from a very young age, despite them being projected as the major protagonists of several poems.

Equally important is an exploration of the masculine ideals of *Tamiḷakam* as reflected through animal imagery. As scholars have identified, the debates on masculinity were considered to have appeared largely within feminist research, and the concept is understood as inherently relational. However, recently, the discussions have focused on the power relation between those who exercise it and those who are at the receiving end.^{xv} Smita Sahgal, in the Vedic context, has shown how the literature reflects upon certain types of images of ideal men

and tried to inquire whether it is reflective of the larger ‘andro-centric’ ideology of the authors of the Vedic corpus.^{xvi} The animal has come up in such discussions in a big way. For instance, the bull has become a prominent symbol of power, an animal that cuts across and associates itself with the ‘divine or the mundane, the elite or the common and so on. It showed the ability to attach itself to multiple historical processes.’^{xvii}

As shown in the previous section, *tiṇais* have already been understood as displaying varied emotions and staging the background for poetic imagination. One of the major aspects in such descriptions is the role of male-female ties as a significant theme around which animal semiotics works. Across *akam* and *puṛam*, there are references attesting to this trend. The examples discussed below, from *Kuruntokai*, will show how interesting animal metaphors were employed by the poets to talk about themes that are mundane and philosophical.

“Love, love, they say. Yet love is no new grief nor sudden disease, nor something that rages and cools. But it comes Like madness in an elephant, coming up when he eats certain leaves; love waits for you to find someone to look at”.^{xviii}

In this poem composed by *Mīlaipperuṅkantaṅ*, the essence of the hero’s love is expressed with the metaphor of an elephant experiencing a state of madness, a state not customary but induced by the consumption of specific leaves in the forest. It is refreshing to see the elephant metaphor here, which often symbolises the power and strength of royalty in the *puṛam* genre. In a similar way, in *Kuruntokai* 62, the poet Kapilar depicts the agony of a lover who was separated from his beloved. The poet draws a parallel between the lover who departed from his lady and a drowsy midnight elephant who is in grief because of the distance, and the poem goes on describing his situation; “Does that girl, eyes like flowers, gathering flowers from pools for her garlands, driving away parrots from the miller fields, does that girl know at all or doesn’t she, that my heart is still there with her bellowing sighs like a drowsy midnight elephant.”^{xix} It is apparent from these examples that the relationship between men and women was explained using animal imagery of various kinds.

Marriage and Non-Human-Animal Imageries

Akam poems are generally understood as describing situations in the development and fulfilment of love between man and woman; however, the poems do not describe the history of any idealised relationship but rather describe various situations, some of which could not

happen to the same couple.”^{xx} Hart has argued that these are not merely love poems to be read for pleasure; rather, they concern the most important of south-Indian values, such as the place of woman, her relationship with the man, and the nature of the power which she possessed through her chastity.^{xxi}

Tolkāppiyam has an interesting take on this; it says, “*varutta mikuti cuṭṭuñ kālai, Uritteṇa miḷipa vāḷkkaiyu-ḷirakkam*”^{xxii}, which translates into “the married life deserves to be pitied if the misunderstanding between them (husband and wife) is very high”. *Tolkāppiyar* goes on to say that the condition of the wife being dominant and the husband being submissive is found only during the ‘love-quarrel’; “*maṇaivi uyarvuñ-kiḷavōṇ panivum, Niṇayu-kālai-pulaiviyaḷuriya*”^{xxiii} which suggests that otherwise it’s only the husband who dominated the relationship. *Tolkāppiyam* enumerates that, in case a woman does not accept the man, he threatens to kill himself or performs an act called *madalerutal*, wherein he humiliates himself in the streets by wearing a cheap flower (*erakam*) garland, hanging the picture of the woman in his neck and climbing on a horse made of palmyra leaves.^{xxiv} It appears to be a blackmailing technique intended to intimidate the woman. *Kuṟuñtokai* 17 refers to such a scene; “When love is ripe beyond bearing and goes to seed, men will ride even palmyra stems like horses; will wear on their heads the reeking cones of the *erukam* bud-like flowers; will draw to themselves the gossip of the streets; and will do worse.”^{xxv}

In an interesting reference from *Naṟṟiṇai*, we find a variety of animals being used to describe a situation where the heroine’s friend asks her to request the hero to marry her and stop visiting her at night, which is filled with dangerous wild animals. The poem is fascinating because of the metaphors the poet used to convey the demand to the hero. They say, we are concerned that you have to cross the wild forest filled with male bears (*nal-pāmpu/nal-arā*), roaming around and sometimes roaring, causing the snake (*nal-arā*) in the mount to tremble. They plead to him, ‘we are afraid since you come at midnight, when a male bear with a gaping mouth that is searching for food rips a curved termite mound, sucks the termites with his snout by breathing like the bellows of a blacksmith, and roars causing the snake in the mound to tremble, he will marry you on an auspicious day, oh friend, and take you with him, your lover from the huge mountains, where farmers who wear *vēngai* flower strands on their heads wake up their elephants and thresh tender millet, on boulders as large as the threshing grounds of farmers in the agricultural land who thresh using oxen, waking them up, and creating tall piles of millet hay.’

A similar concern is expressed in *Akanāñūru* 107, where, on hearing the news of *Talaivaṅ* leaving the house, *Talaivi* is distressed and wants to accompany him to the forest. The conversation develops as *Talaivi*'s friend requests the hero to fulfil her request. *Karikkaṇṇaṅār* draws the forest as a dangerous place with a graphic imagery of a big tiger after killing a stag, eating it fully, and the left-over put on a boulder to dry. After a convincing session, *Talaivi*'s friend indirectly requests the *Talaivaṅ* to get married to her. She says, "She will be your sweet partner in the evenings in a village on the mountain, where fresh buds and fragrant flowers drop on large pebbles in the mornings, and the forest bears the fragrances of wedding houses" (*maṇa maṇai*).^{xxvi} The relationship between men and women in marriage ties continued to be demonstrated using a variety of animal imagery, which was reflected in later and post-*caṅkam* works.

Conclusion

The *Caṅkam* texts, which constitute the primary source for this study, were composed by people of different communities and social backgrounds. The above discussion on themes such as *tiṇai*, love and marriage enable us to reach some possible conclusions about the creation of gender ideals in early Tamil society. The lives of young women and their lovers, the unending waiting of wives for the return of their husbands, the emotional turmoil both men and women had to go through during their period of separation, and the question of marriage have shown us the creation and consolidation of their identities in society. Along with *karpū*, beauty remained important; women were expected to take good care of their beauty. The love between a man and a woman has addressed themes ranging from jealous quarrels, secret meetings, separation, patient waiting and reunion. To evoke these feelings, *akam* poetry extensively uses animals, birds, and plants. Such references cannot be taken as mere anthropomorphic imageries by attributing human emotions to them but demonstrate animals as having an independent existence to an extent. While we admit that these images have helped us understand the human world better, they simultaneously provide a plethora of information about the animal world itself, the spread of species, and their survival in the region during the period under study.

Endnotes

¹Many studies have highlighted the positive engagements humans had with animals where animals were treated as a co-traveller to humanity, from hunting-gathering societies to pastoralism to agricultural

communities. Refer to these works for detailed discussions on the theme: Gordon Child, *Man Makes Himself*, Spokesman, North Western University, 1936; Steven Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind: A Search for the Origins of Art, Religion and Science*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1996; Graham Clark, *World Prehistory: A New Outline*, Cambridge, 1997 (revised); Alan, Bernard (ed.), *Hunter Gatherers in History, Archaeology and Anthropology*, Berg, Oxford, 2004; Shireen Ratnagar, *The Other Indians; Essays o Pastoralists and Prehistomeaning ric Tribal People*, Three Essays Collective, Delhi, 2004.

ⁱⁱ Scholars like Raghava Iyengar, P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar, Ramachandra Dikshitar have contributed to a better understanding of the concept. Sivathamby, p.23.

ⁱⁱⁱ K. Sivathamby, 'Ealy South Indian Society and Economy: The Tiṇai Concept', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 3, no. 5, pp. 20-37, 1974, p.22.

^{iv} *Teyvam, uṇāvē, mā, maram, pul, parai, ceyti yāliṇ pakutiyoytu tokaii, av vakai piṇavam karu eṇa molipa Tolkāppiyam-Porulatikāram*, poem. 966.

^v Sivathamby discussed this aspect using references from *Cilappatikāram*. In one instance when a brahmin describe the road to Maturai on Kōvalan's request, it says; "You have come at the time when *mullai* and *kuriñci* are transformed into distress giving *pālai* by the excessive heat of the King of hot rays-the Sun.", and further he states, with rainfall, they will be transformed into the original form. Now this discussion signifies the complex underpinnings of the composition of physiographical regions as well as the complex human emotion the poet tries to convey through his/her composition. *Ibid.*, p.26.

^{vi} Smriti Haricharan, Naresh Keerthi ' Can the Tinai Understand the Iron Age Early Historic Landscape of Tamil Nadu?', *World Archaeology*, Vo. 46. No. 5, p. 641-660, Taylor and Francis, 2014, p.642.

^{vii} Kailasapathy, *Tamil Heroic Poetry*, p.13.

^{viii} *Pattupāṭṭu, Kalithokai*, poem.103. Lines.1-9.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p.9

^x V. Selvakumar, 'Historical Archaeology in India: Iron Age -Historical Landscapes in the Lower Kāvēri Valley', Sectional President's Address, *Archaeology, Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 80, pp.975-989, December 2019, p.977.

^{xi} *Aiṅkurunūru*, poem.27, lines.1-5.

^{xii} *Aiṅkurunūru*, poem.401, lines.1-5

^{xiii} Sivathamby., 'Ealy South Indian Society and Economy' ., p.28.

^{xiv} *Akanāṇūru*, poem.7.

^{xv} Smita Sahgal, 'Constructing 'Vedic' Masculinities: Animal Symbolism, Mythic Constructions and ritual Practices', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 46, No. 9-10, Sage, pp. 23-42, 2018, p.23.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p.23.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p.26.

^{xviii} *Kuruntokai*, poem.136, p.60

^{xix} *Kuruntokai*, poem.142, p.59.

^{xx} George L. Hart, 'Some Aspects of Kinship in Ancient Tamil Literature', in Thomas R. Trautman ed. *Kinship and History in South Asia*, University of Michigan Press, 1974, p.30.

^{xxi} *Ibid.* p.31.

^{xxii} *Tolkāppiyam: The Earliest Extent Tamil Grammar With a Short Commentary in English Poruḷatikāram-poruḷiyal*, P.S. Subramanya Sastri (ed. Trans.) Vol. 2, The Kuppaswamy Sastri Research Institute, Chennai, 2002, verse.223, p.128.

^{xxiii} *Tolkāppiyam, Poruḷatikāram-poruḷiyal*, 224, p.129.

^{xxiv} *Tolkāppiyam, Akaviyal*, 38.

^{xxv} *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Poetry* (Trans.), A.K. Ramnujan, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1967, poem. 17, p.27.

^{xxvi} *Akanāṇūru*, poem.107, lines.1-22.