

**Exploring History Through Poetic Imagery:
What Do We See When We Read Poems from the Past?**



தாய்ப்பயிர் பிள்ளை வாய்ப்படச் சொரியும் ... நெடுந்தேர்
நெடுநீர்ச் சேர்ப்பன் பகவிவண் வரவே (*Narrinai* 9)
The mother bird feeds its offspring directly from its mouth
Similar to how the king in a grand chariot distributes offerings to the people.

Vasu Renganathan
University of Pennsylvania
vasur@sas.upenn.edu
<http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~vasur/project.html>



ஓன்றாய முக்கூர் பூட்டி யாக்கைச் செறுவமுது... (*Cīvaka cintāmaṇi* 962:1)
Plow your body with a plow of inspiration.

**A critical study of the poems of *Caṅkam* Tamil,
a comparative study of *Caṅkam* and *bhakti* poems,
a close look at the Poetic devices and Literary Techniques,
the innocent captives of literary power and the covert actions exercised upon them.**

Table of Contents

Preface and Acknowledgements	4
Chapter 1. Introduction	7
1.1 Critical study of the poems of ancient past:	10
1.2. Images and the impressions they evoke in people's minds:	13
1.3. Images of poems contribute to the cultivation of Tamil culture:.....	15
1.4. Poetic innovations cause semantic extensions of words:	16
1.5. Predictive metaphors:	18
1.6. Three types of similes in Tamil poetics:	20
1.7. Significances of Similes in Tamil poetics:.....	23
1.8. Poetic discourse of Tamil:	25
1.9. Studying nature to enhance human growth and well-being.....	27
Chapter 2. Historically relevant similes of uncommon objects.....	30
2.1. Similes of common and uncommon objects:	30
2.2. Īcal vālkai: The imagery of <i>cempurru īyal</i> 'red winged ants' for fallen soldiers:.....	32
2.3. Imagery of uncommon objects from Āṇṭāl's <i>Tiruppāvai</i> and <i>Nācciyār tirumoli</i> :	35
2.4. <i>Viraha</i> state (frustration) and the mood of desperation in <i>Caṅkam</i> and Āṇṭāl's poems:	39
2.5. Significance of the legendary animal Āli in Caṅkam poems:	42
2.6. Two diverse traditions of Tamil and their continuum in making imagery with identical objects:	43
2.7. The imagery of <i>ñālar pū</i> and love life in <i>Caṅkam</i> period:	43
2.8. Flowers emitting pollens and the ethics of heroes' actions:	47
2.9. <i>ñālal</i> flower in the context of divine propositions and the continuum from secular to religious life:.....	48
2.10. The Imagery of Āli and its relevance to the two genres of Tamil literature:.....	51
2.11. References of Āli in medieval Tamil poems and its purpose:.....	53
2.12. Imagery surrounding <i>parattais</i> 'concubines':.....	55
2.12.1. <i>Māyap parattai</i> - the sole instance referencing a male concubine.	60
2.13. Prosperity of kingdom and appreciation of love life:	65
2.14. The generosity of kings versus gods and the praise from Tamil poets:	66
Chapter 3. Historiographical accounts from <i>Caṅkam</i> Poems.....	69
3.1. History, historiography and Understanding of the ancient past:	69
3.2. Imagery of a potter and the creator of lives:	69
3.3. Kabilar's love poems and his abundance use of imagery:.....	72
3.4. Imagining a dark rainy day of the <i>Caṅkam</i> period:	74
3.5. <i>Picirāntaiyār</i> 's poem to learn love and affection from birds:	77
3.6. Ethics of war and justification of the catastrophes therein:	78
3.7. Metaphors and the images they offer:	82
3.8. Metaphors of objects and their ingredients:	84
3.9. Swimming in the ocean of love and Nammālvār's literary elegance:	88
3.9.1. Joy of swimming in the Ocean of Love:	89
3.10. The Lord Stands as Everything:	90
3.11. The Takeover and Possession:.....	91
3.11.1. Takeover vs. possession: (<i>Nammālvār</i> 's poem):	91
3.12. Musical renditions of Tamil poems and the tradition of the <i>ōtuvārs</i> :.....	92
3.13. The Origins of <i>Murugan</i> and the concept of <i>cāmi āṭi</i> in Ancient Tamil Culture: A Historiographical Study of <i>Caṅkam</i> Literature:	93
3.13.1. Relevance to the terms of <i>kaṭavu!</i> and <i>teivam</i> in Caṅkam texts and a widespread belief in 'Celestial gods':.....	95
3.13.2. Explicitly linking the references of <i>teivam</i> and <i>kaṭavu!</i> to Murugan in <i>Caṅkam</i> texts	97
3.13.3. Murugan worship in post <i>Caṅkam</i> texts:	99

Chapter 4: Imagery in Tamil and Sanskrit Traditions	101
4.1. Representation of imagery in Tamil and Sanskrit traditions:	101
4.2. Depicting Sky, Clouds and Rain in Sanskrit and Tamil poems:	101
4.3. Element of ‘fear’ in Caṅkam and Sanskrit literatures:.....	104
Chapter 5: Poetic Devices as Embodied in Caṅkam and Bhakti Poems.....	109
5.1. Poetic Devices and their roles in depicting the beauty of the Tamil poems:	109
5.2. Allegories and the concept of (உள்ளறை உவமம்) <i>ullurai uvamam</i> ‘implied analogy’:.....	110
5.3. Metonymy and the concept of (அகுபெயர்) Ākupeyar ‘associated name’ in Tamil:.....	112
5.4. Personification – இயற்கைக்கு மனிதப் பண்பு கொடுத்தல் ‘iyarkaikku manitap paṇpu koṭuttal’:.....	116
5.5. Unveiling the Invisible: Using Metaphors of invisible – உட்பொருள் ‘uṭporul’:.....	117
5.6. Hyperbole – மிகுதிப்படுத்திக் கூறல் ‘mikaippaṭuttik kūral’	120
5.7. Satire - அங்கதம் ‘aṅkatam’:.....	122
5.8. Binary contrast as a poetic device:.....	124
5.9. Alliteration and rhyming of words as a poetic device:.....	127
5.10. <i>Antāti</i> songs with rhyming words in connected lines:.....	129
5.11. Greater than the Greatest and Best of the Best:	131
5.12. Pronouns referring to the Superior in the absence of overt subjects	132
Chapter 6: Imagining the lives of the past through Imagery	134
6.1. Challenges in reading poems to grasp the cultures of the past:	134
6.2. Salt merchants and the custom of <i>barter system</i> :	134
6.3. Use of the words கலம் <i>kalam</i> and புணை <i>puṇai</i> ‘maritime vessels’ and their historical significance:	136
6.4. Clan culture குடி <i>kuṭi</i> of the Caṅkam period:	138
6.5. Linguistic complexity and unraveling the language of <i>Caṅkam</i> poems:	140
6.5.1. Extensive use of enigmatic imagery in historical poems:.....	143
What defines literature, and how should we critically evaluate the appropriate literary works?..	146
References.....	147
Primary sources.....	147
Secondary sources	148
Index	152

Preface and Acknowledgements

Literary works exercise significant influence on individuals and society across various dimensions, manifesting both positive and negative effects, often in subtle and deceptive ways. While the observable impacts can range from beneficial to detrimental, it is crucial to delve deeper into how these works subtly manipulate readers' perceptions and behaviors. Upon engaging with literature, readers may adopt new viewpoints and attitudes, unknowingly incorporating them into their actions. Consequently, individuals might not recognize that their conduct stems from the influence of what they have read. Therefore, a critical examination of literary content is essential to unveil the covert mechanisms through which it shapes human thought and behavior. One of the enchanting aspects of literary works is their ability to evoke imagery from nature, which resonates deeply with both readers and culture. When authors weave natural imagery into human actions, it holds a special place in readers' hearts, as they often recognize these images from their own experiences yet may not have previously linked them to their own lives. The genesis of this work primarily stems from my extensive immersion in Tamil literary works across three distinct genres, coupled with a keen observation of the profound impact of imagery on my personal life. This book delves into numerous images that resonate deeply within the Tamil readership, often embedded within literature without their conscious awareness. I frequently find myself lamenting rather than celebrating the behaviors that have been ingrained in both me and the broader Tamil culture due to the enduring influence of literary works over centuries. I leave it to the readers of this book to uncover the true intent behind my decision to express it this way.

The imagery of a mother bird nurturing her young, men and women toiling in the fields, and red-winged ants in distress, contrast with the serene depictions of white conches, milk churning, and offerings of sugarcane, rice, and fruits. These diverse images were intricately woven into the minds of readers through literature, each carrying its own distinct context. However, certain images, like bees collecting honey from flowers, the significance of broken pottery fragments, or battlefields with elephants etc., failed to leave as profound an impression on readers, for reasons yet unknown. While some make momentary flashes in the spotlight particularly due to their deceitful and deceptive actions, others remain overlooked, their honesty and innocence rendering them invisible to everyone. The introductory chapter of this book establishes the groundwork for readers, guiding them on what to expect and how to approach

literary works, while also cautioning against falling prey to the deceptive aspects of literature. Chapters two to four aim to acquaint readers with the rich tapestry of Tamil literature across three genres, exploring their interconnections and disparities, and highlighting their ingenuity in captivating readers' interest. The emphasis of the fifth chapter lies in analyzing poems through the lens of literary techniques, including similes, metaphors, metonymy, the use of rhyme and so forth. These techniques serve as the primary instruments through which authors engage and sometimes redirect readers' attention, akin to how a patiently waiting white heron captures fish in a pond. The sixth chapter aims to illustrate how to detect clues in poems that reveal historical events.

While all six chapters of this book were freshly conceptualized for this volume, certain ideas and concepts drew inspiration from my previous works penned in Tamil. Specifically, my book இலக்கியப் பயணங்களும் தமிழர் வரலாறும் *ilakkiyap payaṇaṅkalum tamilar varalārum* ('literary journeys and Tamil's history' in Tamil), published by *Kālaccuvaṭu* publications, Nagercoil in the year 2017 served as a catalyst for this endeavor. Readers proficient in both English and Tamil are encouraged to explore both books simultaneously, as it allows for a comprehensive immersion into the essence of these narratives. Much could be expanded upon regarding the subject matter at hand, but due to time constraints and other considerations, I plan to conclude with what I have presented here. Nonetheless, I aspire to persist in my literary journey, not as a creator of literary works, but rather as a critic or keen observer, continuing to examine how literature influences, disrupts, or elucidates the lives of individuals. I endeavored to translate the poetic imagery into tangible visuals, sourcing images from various platforms, duly acknowledging them as needed. Additionally, I extensively utilized <https://gemini.google.com/> and <https://chatgpt.com/> to craft imaginative visuals and refine textual style; <https://www.projectmadurai.org/>, <http://sangam.tamilnlp.com/>, and <http://sangam.tamilnlp.com/mp/json/> to look for relevant words and expressions from electronic resources of *Caṅkam* and *bhakti* poems. Although these online resources are used for word searches, all the poems quoted in this work are taken from the primary sources listed in the references section. Importantly, the source texts do not contain any punctuation, a characteristic style of ancient Tamil texts until the end of nineteenth century printed texts. Ideally, poems from both *Caṅkam* and *bhakti* texts should be read directly from their source texts, without any punctuation.

As I contemplated the themes explored in this book, I acknowledge my indebtedness to those who have subtly influenced, disrupted, or shaped my thoughts, both directly and indirectly. Primary among these influences are the Tamil poems themselves, which, with their blend of clarity and ambiguity, sparked my curiosity and prompted me to delve into them deeply. This engagement led me to spend significant amounts of time not only reading them but also pondering over them on various occasions, like a piece of wood caught amid a whirlpool. Amidst the daunting task of acquiring attention for my work and navigating the realm of publications and publishers, Dr. Jayakumar graciously directed me towards the world of the Tamil Linguistics Association, where I have found valuable support on my academic journey. I am immensely grateful to him for rescuing me from aimless wandering to search for a publisher, and I am equally appreciative of Prof. K. Karunakaran, President of the Tamil Linguistics Association, for graciously agreeing to publish this work under their auspices, as well as reading the earlier version of this manuscript thoroughly to offer his suggestions to improve further. I must also acknowledge Prof. KK's ongoing encouragement in promoting my works, and I fondly recall the release of my previous book, தமிழ் மொழியின் வரலாற்றுப் பயணம்: சங்கம் முதல் இன்று வரை *Tamil moliyin varalārrup payanam: Caṅkam mutual inru varai* ('The historical journey of the Tamil language from Caṅkam until now'), under his support at the department of Linguistics, Bharathiyar University. I owe a great debt of gratitude to numerous friends and colleagues who have supported me throughout my academic journey. However, I wish to pay tribute, with a heavy heart, to the memories of my mentors: Professor S. V. Shanmugam, Professor Harold F. Schiffman, Dr. G. Ravisankar, and my father, Mr. S. Renganathan, whose unwavering guidance instilled in me the confidence to navigate through life's challenges like traversing through turbulent waters. Among the array of friends and colleagues who have imparted valuable lessons to me, I extend special gratitude to Professors A. Rajaram, K. Rangan and K. Karunakaran, Drs. A. Karthikeyan, L. Ramamoorthy, M. Ganesan, Appasamy Murugaiyan, and M. Jayakumar. I am grateful for Dr. A. Karthikeyan's diligent review of the earlier version of this manuscript, offering valuable comments and criticism to improve it. Lastly, I express my heartfelt appreciation to my mother Radha, my wife, Vijayabarathi Vasu, and my sons, Vinoth, Vimalesh, and Vignesh, who have accompanied me on the journey through the peaks of knowledge and wisdom.

Vasu Renganathan
Cherry Hill, NJ, USA, July 4th, 2024.