



## Character Values in Tolkappiyam

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### Abstract

In the Porulatikaram section of the ancient Tamil grammar text Tolkappiyam, character values are defined through literary conventions that govern the two major poetic genres: akam (the inner, personal world of love) and puram (the outer, public world of war, heroism, and society). Instead of naming individual characters, the text universalizes their virtues and emotions by tying them to specific poetic landscapes (tiṇai) and dramatic situations. In akam poems, characters are not given names to emphasize their universal appeal. Their actions and feelings are a reflection of an ideal human being. In puram poems, characters often refer to historical individuals and are defined by their public deeds, societal roles, and adherence to ethics (aram). These values are expressed in themes of heroism and warfare (vīram). The values of characters in Tolkappiyam are not merely stated but are expressed through a variety of literary devices. #

**Keywords:** Tolkappiyam, Akam and Puram, Character values, Tiṇai (poetic landscapes)

### Introduction

Culture (Paṇpātu) essentially means 'becoming refined.' It is interpreted to mean refinement, correction or rectification, maturity, and a way of life. Among these, Values (Viḷumiyam) refer to a structure based on the formation of an individual's thoughts and ideas. It reflects the unified behaviors and thoughts of the majority of people living in a society. Based on this, it can be observed that a society's arts, beliefs, conventions, language, literature, and values constitute its cultural components.

### Kalavu Life (Furtive Union)

The Tolkappiyam stands as a grammar text focused on the individual values that existed in ancient times. Within it, Kalavu (furtive union), which organizes and reflects the life of an individual, has been included. Such "Kalavu is not the taking of another's property in secret, but rather the union of a suitable or superior maiden who has not been given by her kin, who unites with the hero by her own desire, in secret from her kin, and then remains faithful to the path of virtue," is eloquently explained by Parimēlahagar (2010). The fact that this is called Marai (secret) and not Kalavu (theft) is because it is not a harmful theft (Ilampūraṇar, 2010). Some say it is called Marai because the hero and heroine meet in a secret place without the knowledge of their parents. We can see that the Tolkappiyam has identified this clandestine Kalavu as one of the essential cultural norms in the life of the Tamils. This concept, the Kalavu life, suggests that the Tolkappiyam tells us it has been practiced as one of the indispensable cultural values in the life of Tamils from that time until today.

### Karpu Life (Wedded Chastity)

In Tamil culture, Karpu (chastity/wedded life) is a sublime moral conduct that follows the Kalavu life. The conjugal life, where the heroine is given by her parents and married publicly, is called Karpu life. Even if the hero and heroine, united by mutual love, have met through good fate and joined in a spiritual union (uḷappaṇarcci), the Tolkappiyam states that this is when both of them, without the consent of the heroine's parents, formally marry with wedding rituals

so that the world knows the inner resolve they possess to live a domestic life. Such a wedded life occurring after the marriage ceremony is still largely seen among the Tamil people today. Furthermore, the way the Tolkappiyam has explained this only adds to its special status (Ilampūraṇar, 2010).

The concept of Hospitality (Virundhōmbal) occupies a crucial place in the life of the Tamil people. The word Virundhu itself means 'novelty' or 'newness.' Accordingly, the term Virundhinar, or guest, is fittingly used to refer to a 'new person' or 'stranger.' This virtue is defined as lovingly welcoming and serving food to someone who is a new arrival in the home, neither a friend nor a relative. This is why Virundhōmbal stands as a symbol of Tamil civilization and refinement.

Therefore, the Tolkappiyar affirms this, stating: "which is why the Tolkappiyar [states this]."

From this statement by the Tolkappiyar, it is clear that hospitality was one of the foremost duties of ancient housewives (illara peṅkaḷ) who lived during his era (Ilampūraṇar, 2010). The very fact that the Tolkappiyam articulated this shows that hospitality has had a permanent place in Tamil culture since ancient times.

### Hospitality in Sangam Literature

In Sangam literature, the heroine (leader of the household) is described as welcoming and serving guests with a cheerful face (mugamalarcciyuḍaṇ), even at night, as conveyed in the Narriṇai anthology (Subramanian, 2007)<sup>[4]</sup>. Later, the Thirukkuraḷ further emphasized this cultural value, stating that hospitality, one of the essential virtues of a housewife, must be performed with a cheerfulness that radiates both internally and externally (akamum puramum malarndhu).

### Classification and Nature of Living Beings

The ancient Tamils possessed a culture of scientific classification related to distinguishing and categorizing living beings, even in the period before such technology

became modern. Through this system, it is evident that the Tamils of Tolkāppiyar's era were able to classify living organisms (uyirgaḷai pakuththarindhu) and domesticate (pazhakki vaiththirundha) those required for their use. Furthermore, the passage suggests that some of these creatures were even regarded as deities, a tradition that continues to be observed today (Subramanian, 2000). Tolkāppiyam's specific classification is based on the number of senses (uṇarvu) possessed by a creature, starting with plants having a single sense (touch) and progressing up to human beings having six senses.

### **Tiṇai Mayakkam (Blending of Landscapes)**

Tolkāppiyar stated that the primary elements (mudārporuḷ) specific to one tiṇai (landscape/theme) were not forbidden from blending with the primary elements of another tiṇai.

When analyzing the line mentioned (though the original verse is not fully present in the source text), which leads Ilampūraṇar (2007) to comment that karupporuḷ blending occurred—for instance, a hero wore the kaḷunīr flower (a water lily, the karupporuḷ of the Marutam/Agricultural landscape) and the vetci flower (the flower of the Kuṛiṇci/Mountain landscape)—it's evident that the blending was not limited to the land (nilam) alone. The time (poḷudhu), the deity, and the other fourteen elements of the karupporuḷ (secondary elements), along with their respective uripporuḷ (themes), were also subject to this blending (Ilampūraṇar, 2010).

This concept of Tiṇai Mayakkam reveals that it paved the way for people from diverse linguistic groups, different communities, and varied cultural practices to coexist and blend seamlessly with Tamil culture.

### **Nāḷum Kōḷum (Days and Omens)**

In ancient Tamil culture, the custom of observing auspicious and inauspicious days before undertaking an action was prevalent, as stated in the Tolkāppiyam (Ilampūraṇar, 2010). The verse states that the hero in a furtive relationship (kaḷavozhukkam) does not have the custom of consulting or abandoning the union based on Ōrai (auspicious time/day). Ōrai signifies a good mūgūrttam (auspicious hour). This implies that the hero, driven by intense love for the heroine, did not deviate from the path of virtue by consulting an auspicious day.

The attention of the ancient Tamils was not limited to observing good days; they also focused on observing good omens (nalla cakuṇam). The lines of the Tolkāppiyam that declare this show that, without fail, fear and joy were observed through various omens (like good days and bad days), and safeguards were maintained in consideration of time and circumstance. Even today, one can see that the majority of Tamils still observe omens such as a cat crossing the path or an encounter with a widow (Ilampūraṇar, 2010).

### **Divine Beliefs and the Tiṇai (Landscape) System**

The Tamils, who made their culture known to the world, had a deep belief in divine worship, as declared by the Tolkāppiyam.

The text states that the people belonging to each specific landscape (tiṇai) worshipped the respective deities associated with that region. This practice showcases the distinct cultural expressions of the people of each tiṇai, and through this system of divine belief, we can see that these

practices hold an unwavering place in Tamil culture (Ilampūraṇar, 2010).

This system of connecting a deity to a specific landscape is known as Tiṇai Vaippu Muṛai (The Method of Setting the Landscapes). For reference, the classifications are:

Tiṇai (Landscape) Chief Deity Kuṛiṇci (Mountainous) Murugaṇ (Seiyōn) Mullai (Forest/Pastoral) Māyōn (Vishnu) Marutam (Agricultural/Plain) Vēndaṇ (Indra) Neytal (Coastal/Littoral) Varuṇaṇ (God of the Sea) Pālai (Waste/Desert) Korraivai (Goddess of Victory/Durgā)

### **Conclusion**

The Tolkāppiyam treats Kalavu (furtive love) and Karpu (wedded life) as the two eyes of Tamil culture. These two forms of love blossom from feelings of emotion, youth, and affection. These values are interwoven into the fabric of Tamil life, taking permanent root as Hospitality (Virundhōmbal), Divine Belief, the Tiṇai classification system, and various customs and beliefs. All of these traditions serve to proclaim the rich cultural values (paṇpāṭṭu vizhumiyangaḷ) of the Tamils. Furthermore, the text observes that a society's values are also expressed through its stories, proverbs, and religion.

### **References**

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