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Manuscript Title: Poetry as Plant Writing: Vegetal Dialectic in Sangam Poetry

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Abstract

Sangam (meaning "academy" or "fraternity") poetry refers to the literature of classical Tamil, comprising over 2000 poems by more than 500 poets. It is one of the oldest literary corpora in South India. The poems are classified as *akam* (interior) and *puram* (exterior). *Akam* is love poetry, and *Puram* is war poetry. The plants in both categories evoke spatial and affective metaphors of love, kinship, friendship, domesticity, and public life. For instance, the five landscapes in *akam* poems, hillside, seaside, forests, cultivated fields, and wilderness, which reflect each mood, are named after a flower or plant of that respective region. This paper explores the bioregional imagination in selected *Sangam* poetry and its rich flora. In this study, *Sangam* poetry is read as phytography (plant writing), drawing on the epistemological and analytical frameworks of critical plant studies, environmental studies, and ecopoetics. The botanical life in these poems navigates desire, love, and human interaction. The emerging

academic interest in the ontology of plant subjectivity in the posthuman age coincides with the botanical imagination and phytocritical understanding of the plant world in *Sangam* poetry. By undermining anthropocentrism, plants in *Sangam* poetry intervene in the cultural and literary production of the old Tamil literature. These poems propose a vegetal dialectic, the coming together of the plant and non-plant worlds, in its complicated variety of differences and similarities.

Keywords: *Phytography; Sangam; Plant writing; Poetry; Vegetal dialectic*.

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Introduction

Tamil, a language belonging to the Dravidian family, was spoken by Tamils across the world. It is one of the oldest classical languages that was predominantly used by the people of Tamil Nadu in South India.[1] *Sangam* literature in the language is one of the largest documented literary archives that dates back to the 3rd century BCE- 3rd century CE. However, there are contesting viewpoints regarding the dating and periodization of *Sangam* poetry (Tieken 5; Zvelebil 2). *Sangam* poetry consists of over 2,000 poems by more than 500 poets. This entire corpus has been used to understand ancient Tamil culture, society, and history. The early classical Tamil literature that has survived over time and natural calamities consists of the Eight Anthologies (*Ettuthokai*), the Ten Long Poems (*Pattuppattu*), and the Tamil grammar text called the *Tholkappiyam* (Old Composition). Thematically, *Sangam* poetry was classified into two categories: *akam* (interior) and *puram* (exterior). *Akam* is the love poetry of erotic and passionate affairs. *Puram* is public poetry which features kings, soldiers and wars. However, a strict division between *akam* and *puram* poems often fails as poems from both categories overlap in their themes and treatment at times (Ramanujan 241-242).

[1] Tamil is also the official language of the union territory Puducherry. Tamil-speaking communities live across the world. In countries such as Sri Lanka and Singapore, Tamil is recognized as one of the official languages.

Scholars have widely studied nature, ecology and the environmental perspective presented by *Sangam* poets (Murali 1998; Varadarajan 1969). Varadarajan notes that "these ancient poets do not treat of nature alone, but resort to it always to describe human life in its varying aspects, chiefly love and war. In short, they knit together the feelings of man and the beauties of nature in closest bonds and warmest associations" (2-3). Though *Sangam* poetry is strictly tied to its conventions, its meaning remains open to further interpretation within the system as a whole (Murali 185). Meaning in *Sangam* poetry is not recognized as an isolated unit, but is understood within a web of relations. S. Murali observes that meaning is "a process interlinked to all and everything at all points" (185). He continues, "this comes close to what we now recognize as a biosphere in ecological terms" (185). The aforementioned observations lead to the founding principle of *Sangam* poetry: a dialectic of humans and plants. The objective of this study is to recognize the vegetal dialectic in selected *Sangam* poetry using the frameworks of critical plant studies, environmental studies, ecopoetics and bioregional imagination. In this analysis, selected *akam* and *puram* poetry are identified as phytographia or plant writing. Instead of understanding plants as mere metaphorical devices that embellish the poem, phytography explores the agentic nature and cognitive potential embedded in vegetality. The study uses the selected *Sangam* poetry that was translated by George L. Hart III, Hank Heifetz and A.K. Ramanujan.

Phytography and Vegetal Dialectics

Phytography (plant-writing) identifies plants as autonomous, intelligent beings. This kind of "post-humanist life writing", a synthesis of plant language and human language in literature, refers to humans writing about plants and plants writing back (Vieira 213; Ryan, *Writing* 98). John Charles Ryan coined the term vegetal dialectics to interpret selected botanical poetry (*Plants* 15). Charles Ryan explains that "vegetal dialectics is marked by the oscillation of states of difference and sameness between plants and non-plants" (*Plants* 16). It proposes to foreground plant subjectivity as a thinking, feeling, sensory- rich, receptive and responsive being.

The dialectical method seeks to uncover the truth inherent in contradictory ideas by juxtaposing arguments. Accordingly, it was expected to resolve the conflict presented. Greek philosophers have understood that nature in its totality exists "in ceaseless flux, in unresting motion and change" (Engels, *Dialectic* 13). The dialectic in Hegelian idealism (the thesis-anti-thesis-synthesis model) influenced Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to invent their theory of dialectical materialism. Thus, Marx and Engels shifted the focus from philosophical, abstract

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ideas to socio-economic conditions in the real world. According to Marx and Engels, the history of men, the social history, and the history of nature are interdependent (Marx and Engels, *The German* 62-63). However, in classical Marxism, the dialectical framework was reduced to interactions and developments within the human world (Foster 24). The contradiction between nature and human world must be resolved to reconcile the two better. In this dialectical-ecological perspective, the reconciliation of natural and human history operates on a continuous flux (Foster 13-14). Enlightenment rationality, scientific progress and the industrial revolution celebrated a man's control over natural resources. A synthesis of the natural and human worlds, recognizing the contradictions inherent in both systems, culminates in a new founding principle. A chain of negations and opposite forces always brings out something new.

Plant Intelligence, Cognition, and Agency

Plants do not have a brain or a centralised nervous system with which humans associate intelligence and cognition. Hence, understanding the interconnected terms such as plant intelligence, vegetal cognition, plant memory and plant agency requires thinking beyond anthropocentric assumptions. Plant intelligence enables plants to thrive in the environment by storing, memorizing and interpreting information through a decentralised system of cells and chemical signals (Trewavas 2). Vegetal cognition has been of interest to various scientists, starting with Charles Darwin (Gagliano 2015; Pecere 2026; Ryan, *Plants* 4). The internal information-processing mechanisms of cognition and perception in plants organize the sensory inputs they receive, such as touch, sound, smell and light. Plant agency refers to external actions, responsiveness, and adaptability that enable plants to survive in their environment.

In analyzing *Sangam* poetry, emphasis is placed on the literal interpretations of the terms such as plant cognition, agency, and memory rather than on disputing scientific interpretations of the same. While discussions of these terms continue in the relevant literature, it is imperative to acknowledge alternative interpretations and methodological limitations in applying contemporary posthumanist frameworks to ancient texts. Worlds like that of *Sangam* operated on a set of principles, morals and ethics different from that of the post-enlightenment age, which post-humanism critiqued. Hence, a non-reductive reading without methodological invasion, but one that focuses on the cultural, aesthetic, and structural realities of the *Sangam*, is attempted in this analysis. Rather than unthinkingly applying a modern theoretical framework to *Sangam* poetry to uncover the fundamental realities of its organization, this study examines how the specific world order intrinsically appreciated the environment.

Phytographical writing focuses on "plant intelligence, behaviour, corporeality, temporality, seasonality, emplacement, language, historicity, and mortality" (Ryan, *Writing* 115-116). In *Sangam* poems, over two hundred plants are named and described, with emphasis on their root, stem, bark, bud, petal, inflorescence, seasons, and special forms of pollination (Ramanujan 249). It demonstrates the poets' accuracy, detail, and observational skills in recording the regional botanical world in all its richness. For instance, in a poem, a woman's anxiety about her man's love has made her skin so pale. Once, it was "more radiant/ than the color of the soft peeled stalk/ of a waterlily in the pond of our town" (Hart 20). There are particular features and specific placement of the plant that are detailed in the poem. The heroine's pale skin and the waterlily's brightness create a contrast that reflects the desolation associated with the *marutam* landscape. Similarly, in the *palai* landscape "bunches of large bright flowers on thorny-trunked red cotton trees" fall onto the earth like fire with thunder (Hart 33). The description of the inflorescence, size and colour of the flower, and nature of the bark are identified with clarity. The smell of the "white flowers unfurl/ and hang on black-branched *mara* trees" reminds the travellers of those they have left at home (Hart 34). The readers experience the movement of flowers in the wind. The plant recreates the spatial metaphors of remembering home and loved ones. The sensory experience of touch (women's skin compared to the colour of waterlily stalk), sound (flowers of cotton tree dropped on earth like thunder in the roaring wind), and smell (of *mara* flowers) encompasses the plant lives written in these poems. It also refers to the impermanence and seasonality of plants and treats them as a cognitive entity. Embodied cognition in plants presents them as active agents communicating with their surroundings.

The Vegetal Dialectic in *Akam* Poetry

In *akam* poetry, the *Sangam* landscape and ecology are divided into different geographical units that reflect specific feelings, moods and experiences: *kurinci*, *mullai*, *marutam*, *neytal*, and *palai*. This *aintinai* (five-fold categorization) corresponds to respective flora and fauna. *Akam* poetry is usually set in a specific time and place (*mudal*) within its ecosystem (*karu*), where lovers experience their respective phases of love (*uri*). The lovers must be well-matched in social status, wealth, age, etc. Otherwise, the relationships are *kaikkilai* (unrequited love) and *peruntinai* (mismatched love). The emotional and affective pairing of the landscape with human interiority, a dialectic of inner and outer worlds, creates the psychic complexity of these poems. The interiority of the human mind is not devoid of the exteriority, as they complement each other. *Kurinci tinai*, named after the flower of the same name, represents hilly areas and

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mountains. The poems in the *akam* sequence, set against the background of *kurinci tinai*, set the scene for lovers' meetings. The *kurinci* plant, of the genus *Strobilanthes* and the family *Acanthaceae* flowers once every twelve years. They are abundant in the south Indian hills, such as the Nilgiris (the name Nilgiris, meaning "blue hills" derives from the *kurinci* flowers in the region). Tourists frequent to get a glimpse of the rare blossoming of the blue-purple-coloured flowers.

In Tamil poetics, the sudden outburst of first love is likened to the rare, sudden blossoming of the *kurinci* plant. The long years of anxious waiting by the men and women and their initiation into the new experience of love (blossoming) are effectively translated into plant life. For the botanical part, as A. K. Ramanujan comments, *kurinci* plant is honey-rich and highly competitive (permitting no other plants in its vicinity), again symbolizing the restraints of possessive love (Ramanujan 250). In *Kuruntokai* 3, a woman describes her love three dimensionally, encompassing height, breadth and depth: "bigger than earth", "higher than sky" and "unfathomable than the waters" is her love for the man from the mountains where "bees make rich honey/ from the flowers of the *kurinci*/ that has such black stalks" (Ramanujan 5). This poem is the lover-woman's reply to a female friend who has doubts about the nature of her friend's love. The woman replies with the poetic metaphor of the *kurinci* plant from the mountains, which blossoms only once every many years, likening it to the uniqueness of their love. This particularization highlights the plant's regional significance. The man becomes the landscape, the mountains. Her love for the man is unquantifiable as the earth, sky and water. The woman is the *kurinci* plant in his region with honey, bees and black stalks. The detailed and accurate description of the plant as the flower, honey, and black stalks, signalling the woman's bodily features, indicates the lovers' yearning for a physical union. The transition from an unquantifiable nature to the specificities of the plant gives a shape and language to their love. There are different dialectics of desire at work here. The abstract nature of her love is combined with the concrete image of the *kurinci* plant to denote the love one feels for another. Nature as a whole is juxtaposed with the plant, the mountains and a lover from the mountains. Moving away from the abstractness of the lover's love at the beginning of the poem, her love takes its concrete form through the plant. It is through the plant that the woman communicates the exact nature of her love to her friend. The woman's vegetal love roots for her man. She plants herself and her love in his region. Like the plant, she wants to be of his region, thereby becoming his woman.

The flowers and fruits on the hilltops represent love's plenty. The ripe mangoes, jackfruits, and parched millet set the scene of abundance. The erotic, sensuous and the forbidden desires are at the core of the *akam* poetry. The plant's liminal presence between the environment and humans navigates the love ethic of these poems by synthesising contrasting and similar elements. *Kurinci* is not the only plant that appears in the mountain poems. In one of Kapilar's poems (*Akananuru* 82), the heroine loses sleep after seeing a man for the first time. Indeed, she is love-struck. She remembers the first time she saw this man. From his appearance, with a bow and arrow at his side, it was clear that he was hunting an elephant (metaphorically indicating that he was also after her elephant-like desire). Moreover, "he asked which way/ the elephant went/ with an arrow buried in its side" (Ramanujan 7). Then the woman presents a visual imagery of the man standing "at the edge/ of a ripe-eared millet field" (Ramanujan 7). Then she wonders: among all the people who watched this man, she was the only one who lost her sleep. On one side, we have tools to tame the animal, the arrow, and the bow. This is how men enter the wilderness. On the other hand, the gigantic desire that the man chases in the form of an elephant eventually led him towards the "ripe-eared millet field." The millet field is ready for harvest. So is the heroine's love for him. The man is yet to know love. It is only a matter of both meeting and consummating their love. The sexual tension is very evident. Though the surrounding nature is in complete harmony (the flute music, the sweet sound of waterfalls, dancing peacocks, etc.), the woman could not find her balance. The contrasts between the inner and outer worlds give the poem its meaning.

There are poems subtly describing the first sexual experience. A woman returned from the hills tells her girlfriend:

> sweeter than milk
> mixed with honey from our gardens
> is the leftover water in his land,
> low in the waterholes
> covered with leaves
> and muddied by animals. (Ramanujan 10)

Her tastes have altered. The reliability of home-brewed milk and honey no longer pleases her. Its virgin-like purity does not impress her. Even the dirty water from her lover's land, symbolising the first sexual experience, makes her ecstatic. Nature has its share of pure and dirt. Out of these contrasting experiences, her love triumphantly emerges.

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Neytal tinai, named after *neytal* lilies or blue water lilies (Nymphaea pubescens), comprises coastal areas, seashore and backwaters. The flower blooms late into the evening, signifying the sadness of separated lovers, their anxious waiting and the much-anticipated secret meetings. The flower evokes a feeling of cool breeze and wet climate. The *neytal* flower floats freely like the heroine wandering around the aquatic waterbodies in search of her lover. Its beauty is comparable to that of the heroine's body. Salt merchants and fisher men frequent the region. Black-legged white herons are seen everywhere. A woman, trying to dissuade the man from a long journey, explains how shattered she would be if he leaves:

> What with the nasty cold wind
> Blowing through everything
> And the misery of evenings
> In your absence,
> She is a water lily
> In a dry bed
> Trampled by white herons
> Overfed on a whole shoal of fish.
> She'll not last a day, believe me,
> And you don't even think of it. (Ramanujan 42)

The evening and the cool breeze set the atmosphere. The lonely heroine identifies herself with the impermanence of water lilies. The predatory white herons who ate the fish have trampled upon the lilies. Neither the lilies nor the heroin would last a single day in the absence of love. In Ammuvanar's poem (*Ainkurunuru* 186), mothers warn their young daughters to beware of men's tricks. The girl is caught between her mother and her lover. She has heard the people talking of a chariot coming to splatter "the dark *neytal* lilies near the bubbling backwaters" (Ramanujan 31). Hence, the mother in the poem warns the girl not to go out. The contrasting values of the mother's world and the lover's world are at odds. The lilies are a lover's message to a woman living under strict parental control. It metaphorically translates into whatever the lover intends to gift the woman. The man from the seashore is looking for his woman near the backwaters. The sea meets the backwaters. The bubbling backwaters refer not only to the ecosystem but also to the lively, laughing and spirited young heroine. The lilies, the forbidden gift and the secret message demarcate the sea/backwaters, and the mother's household/outside.

Plant-human interactions and the symbiotic relationship are explored in many *Sangam* poems. When the laurel tree (*punnai* tree) sprouted, mother told her daughter, "It qualifies/ as a sister to you, and it's much better/ than you" (Ramanujan 33). A kinship and familial bond, beyond blood ties, is assumed between the plant and the woman. Donna Haraway (2003) identifies the co-existence and interdependence of humans and plants. She elaborates on how, as a society, human beings are driven and organized by plants. Agriculture is a good example of a field in which the lives of those who cultivate crops are entirely regulated by propagation, seasons, and harvest. The laurel tree in the poem watches and protects like an elder sister. Therefore, the girl in the poem is embarrassed to laugh with her lover under the tree. He is a man from the seashore. She persuades him to go away with her: "yet, if you wish, there's plenty of shade elsewhere" (Ramanujan 33). She is caught up between the mother/sister and the lover. The laurel tree stands tall between them. It is presented with intelligence, memory, feeling and the power to interfere in human affairs. They need another place to be in love. With temporal and spatial dominion, the tree controls the surroundings and humans behave accordingly. Vegetal cognition helps plants to communicate with other organisms. As the woman in the poem, humans can feel the plant language of protectiveness, kindness, and the like only when plant subjectivity is identified. In another poem, the town's gossip about the woman's affair is so loud that it sounds like the bees on laurel trees (Ramanujan 48). Because of this noise, the woman could not hear the voice of his chariot. The metaphors of the human world of gossip and the natural world of pollen, bees, and laurel trees are combined to convey the reality of a woman's situation.

The *palai tinai* of deserts and wilderness symbolizes lovers' quest or journey. The arid landscape evokes the images of anxiety and torments caused by lovers' separation. Everything a man/woman experiences in the ecosystem reminds them of the other partner. In the wilderness swallowed by wildfire, the harsh environment brings back memories of his woman, with freckles like kino flowers, hair flowing like honey and skin like a young mango leaf (Ramanujan 51). These comparisons indicate the beauty of the young heroine. The barren landscape is juxtaposed with the beauty of a woman in her prime. In between the crux lies the salvation of the man. The journey makes sense only when he is supposed to return to her. In another poem, the girlfriend consoles the woman in love who awaits her man's return from the wilderness. She says that in the wild "dry *nemai* trees carry spider webs /that shiver in the wind", which were compared to "the banners on a royal elephant" (Ramanujan 53). The banners on a royal elephant symbolize the ruling king's authority, power, and the battlefield.

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Hence, the image fits more of a *puram* poem. By comparing the spider webs on the trees to banners on a royal elephant, the elements of *akam* and *puram* are combined. The spider webs on the trees are also symbols of victory. Even in the severe conditions of *palai tinai*, these plants survive. The rest of the poem is filled with other wild imagery: wolves killing pigs, vultures drinking blood, etc. It shows how death, life, and survival are intermingled across different life forms, such as plants, animals, and humans.

Mullai tinai, the forest and its surroundings, represents lovers' patient waiting that would eventually culminate in their happiness after marriage. Lovers cannot bear the weight of love as the evening reddens the white jasmine (Ramanujan 74). In one poem, the heroine's sadness is conveyed through natural signifiers. There is no mention of men or women, or of how deeply they are in love. It is all implied. First, the poet describes what an ideal evening looks like: the sun goes down, the sky reddens, the misery deepens, and the *mullai* flower begins to bloom in the dusk (Ramanujan 67). The poem concludes that even night, dawn or noon is evening "to one who has no one" (67). The ideal evening is contrasted with a lover's evening. The *mullai* flower blooms, and the day bids farewell. The man/woman awaits the lover. In another poem, the cassia trees have bloomed. One could mistake them as the first sign of a monsoon. But the girlfriend tells the women that "these cassia trees are gullible" (Ramanujan 70). The true monsoon is yet to come. The woman has already started to believe that the man who said he would return with the first rain has broken his promise. But, the untimely arrangement of flowers on the cassia trees cannot be trusted. Nature can also be credulous in its doings. The man's/woman's knowledge of the same makes the love stay. Otherwise, the woman in the poem would have easily believed that the man broke his promise. In the poem, the idea communicated is that the trees are gullible, but the man is not. At least that is what the girlfriend tries to tell. What if the flowers bloomed and the monsoon arrived on time? What if the man has really broken the promise? The poem's underlying tone suggests that this is also possible. However, within the conventions of Tamil poetics, the *Sangam* heroine can only choose to believe it otherwise. If he is too lovesick, he can also come to her before the rains, "faster than the rains" (Ramanujan 78).

An agricultural community lives depending heavily on the seasons. In a poem, the man, like a plowman, rushes towards his woman, his land all wet and ready to seed, before the season of monsoon ends (Ramanujan 75). He is in a distant land. Her place is not easy to reach. Like the "gently moving bamboo" to which her arms are compared, she exists in a faraway place. Bamboo also signifies the unreachable heights. The man entering the season of love has to be

prepared to meet his lover. A man, returning to see his woman, tells his charioteer to go slowly when they enter "the jasmine country" (Ramanujan 76). The season is extraordinary:

> Rains in season,
> Forests grow beautiful.
> Black pregnant clouds
> Bring the monsoons, and stay.
> Between flower and blue-gem
> Flower on the bilberry tree
> The red-backed moths multiply,
> and fallen jasmines
> cover the ground.
> It looks like
> A skilled man's work of art,
> This jasmine country. (Ramanujan 76)

The man does not want to breach the peace, rhythm, and tranquillity within the jasmine country. He does not want "the clatter of horse and chariot" to frighten the "bamboo-legged doe ready in desire" (Ramanujan 76). The speed of his other world (civilization, culture, etc.) has to be controlled in her world to be with his love. Once again, the interiority of the intimate realm (*akam*) is juxtaposed with the outside world (*puram*). Despite the delicate form of female beauty that appears in most of the *Sangam* poetry, the woman in these poems can also be "a girl with teeth sharp as thorns" (Ramanujan 79). This can also refer to the sharp words she might use.

Marutam tinai, the agricultural land, depicts the fate of love after marriage. As the initial attraction and romantic interest between the couple fade, the love and intimacy suffer- quarrels, doubts, infidelity and tensions surface. *Marutam* tree (queen's flower) survives on water. Hence, it has been identified as a symbol of life. Like the *marutam* tree that needs water, a marital relationship needs renewal to thrive in unlikely situations. In these poems, the women often encounter their men's deceitful behaviour, cheating and lying. In this ecosystem, the blue lilies, symbol of longing in the *neytal* landscape, reappear as a woman's teary eyes: "…when it floods, / dark flowers look/ like the eyes/ of women dipping in a pond" (Ramanujan 106). The flowers have submerged under the water; so, too, has the woman's trust in her man. Though the woman's sad situation is very evident to others, as her girlfriend says, the former talks too much to gloss it over. The underwater lilies symbolize her how sad she is underneath.

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In another poem, referring to the infidelity of the man, the woman uses the metaphor of a plowman who claims that he accidentally rubbed against the flowering branches:

> And he's from the place
> Of the portia tree:
> Plowmen bend
> Its flowering branches
> To spray themselves
> With its young pollen
> Clustered like beans. (Ramanujan 107)

In reality, his act was intentional. The smell of flowers and yellow pollen, indicating the presence of the other woman, is everywhere on his body. The wife knows that the man is lying. Though he has visited another woman, she is ready to forgive him. Between his lie and her readiness to forgive him, the turmoils of marital life strike.

The Vegetal Dialectic in *Puram* Poetry

Purananuru and *Patirruppattu* are the two *Sangam* anthologies which feature *puram* poems. The king, the centre of the social order of the *puram* poems, was expected to rule over the people and environment alike. The caste system did exist; the low castes and women were marginalized (Hart and Heifetz xvii-xxi, Omvedt 34-37). The poets were mostly from high castes and were patronized by royal courts (Hart and Heifetz xxiii). However, they largely inherited from an oral tradition that was popularized by travelling and singing bards, drummers, etc., who were born into low-castes.

There are different landscapes, flowers and emotions in *puram* poetry that correspond to those of *akam* poetry (Ramanujan 252). The *vetci* flower (scarlet ixora) in *puram* corresponded to *kurici* in *akam.* Both are mountain plants. Warriors used to adorn themselves with *vetci* before they set out for war. The plant is also associated with cattle-lifting, which is the prerequisite stage of war. *Vanci*, a creeper in *puram* corresponded to *mullai* in *akam*. It is associated with war and invasion. *Tumbai* (white dead nettle) in *puram* corresponded to *neytal* in *akam*. It is related to the battlefield and warriors. Finally, *ulinai*, a cotton shrub in *puram* corresponded to *marutam* tree in *akam*. In *puram* poetry, plants appear as symbols of the battlefields, victory, bravery, royalty, and military expeditions. The invasive vegetal growth is often likened to that of a state. Creepers like *Vanci* are metaphorically associated with invading the enemy territory.

In *puram* poetry, the romantic imagery of the *akam* is twisted. The green that young women wore in *akam* poetry is the blood-drenched wreath in the battlefield in the *puram* poetry. The women in love and the man in love with war are juxtaposed to convey meaning in *Purananuru* 271 (Ramanujan 186). The *nocci* flowers, which once adorned beautiful women, are "a garland of *nocci*, /coated with blood" on the battlefield (Hart 197). The man who wore the garland to the battlefield has died. The vultures destroyed the garland.

Unlike *akam* poetry, which explores the passion between unnamed men and women, in *puram* poetry, everything is named. Every clan, dynasty, warrior, poet and king are named. Hence, *puram* poetry has specific historical backing. So, plants used in the *puram* poetry signify associated geopolitical identity. For instance, the poet, Kovur Kilar, composed a poem calling for an end to the war. He was playing an intermediary role to pacify two Chola kings, Netunkilli and Nalankilli, who were at war against each other. In ancient Tamilakam, Tamil kingdoms were represented with their respective botanical symbols. The palmyra tree flower represents the Chera dynasty; the Neem tree flower, the Pandya Dynasty; the Laburnum flower, the Chola dynasty. The poet tries to put sense into the ears of war-mongering kings by saying that the two sides, both Chola kings, fighting are represented by the same flower, laburnum. Since they are not fighting the Chera or Pandya kings, fighting among themselves will only divide the house against their enemies. It is like fighting with oneself. The poem unfolds:

> Your enemy is not the kind who wears
> the white leaf of the tall palmyra
> nor the kind who wears garlands
> from the black-branched neem trees.
> Your chaplets are made of laburnum,
> Your enemies are made of laburnum too. (Ramanujan 121)

The poet sets the first condition to be at war with another. The war has to be fought between enemies. A Chola king should fight either the Chera or the Pandya. Then, if the fight is won, there will be subsequent glory. The two Chola kings fighting here share the same totemic lineage, laburnum. The flower symbolizes communal memory, political solidarity and a kinship beyond blood ties. The plants, laburnum, palmyra and neem trees, negotiate human morals, values and ethics. The poet problematizes the dialectic of victory and defeat to explain the futility of war. However, the poem is not completely anti-war in sentiment. It only discourages war between the same clans. The poet even favours war if it is fought between enemies. Hence, two opposite arguments, for and against war, are simultaneously discussed in the text.

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A *kati maram* (tutelary tree) guarded the king. In combat, the enemy king would cut down the *kati maram* and make a *muracu* (drum) using its wood. *Purananuru* 23, 36 and 50 mention the symbolic and symbiotic significance of a *kati maram* (Hart and Heifetz 19, 30, 38). The felling of the tree broke the symbiotic power and spiritual connection between the king and the guardian tree. The enemy takes over the kingdom by making the war drum to announce the arrival of a new order. The ruler's life and the vegetal life are cut short violently. The vegetal dialectic that combined the tree and the king to create the meaning of the sovereign was disintegrated.

In a cycle of poems on the patron king Vel Pari and his Perambu hill, the poet Kapilar eulogises the vegetal relationship between the two (Ramanujan 142-150). *Purananuru* 109 narrates incidents in which Pari's Perambu hill was attacked by the Chera, Chola, and Pandya kings (Ramanujan 142). Kapilar advises the kings to capture Pari's hill not through combat but by singing and dancing. These lines indicate Pari's artistic inclination and benevolence. Pari's peaceful approach to life contrasts with the kings' pursuit of violence. Kapilar reminds the kings how rich the vegetation of Pari's hill is. Its vegetal abundance is described thus: the hill has bamboo rice, jackfruit, sweet potatoes, and honey, which are not grown under "the plows/ of plowmen" (Ramanujan 142). These are grown without agriculture and without human effort. Nature, in its abundance, also symbolises and reflects Pari's character. The ecology is blessed with his presence and vice versa. The (eco-friendly) human and the hill are dialectically fused together to establish the reciprocal relationship that sustains the universal harmony. The non-human world's existence in its own terms, without human intervention, presents an idyllic, pastoral picture. The brutality of the attacking kings is juxtaposed with nature's autonomy, agency and self-sustainability. In *Purananuru* 114, 117 and 118, Kapilar records how the vegetation remembers and mourns its benevolent ruler even after Pari was killed in treachery (Ramanujan 147-150). Pari's life and his eco-friendly approach are encoded in the hill's vegetal memory, against the recorded history of the kings and their conquests. The grief of the abandoned hill is conveyed through remembering the old times: "because his (Pari's) sceptre was just/ the green land knew no lack of rains" (Ramanujan 149). Even at dark times, Pari's hill flourished:

> his crops would still come to harvest,
> the bushes would flower,
> large-eyed rows of wild cows
> would calve in the yard

and crop the grass. (Ramanujan 149)

When small, self-sustainable lands like that of Pari's were attacked and annexed to the larger ones, the micro history of the former, its people and their environment get erased.

The nature/culture synthesis, a common *puram* dialectic, is also seen in *Purananuru* 128 (Ramanujan 152). In the poem, chieftain Ay Andiran (Aye) and his Pothiyil hill were praised by the poet Mutamociyar. The monkey in the poem, while looking for a ripe jackfruit, mistakes the drum for the fruit. He accidentally taps on it, and the male swans start to sing. As an interconnected universal rhythm being produced, Aye's hill, welcomes dancers, not conquerors. The drum, symbolizing artistry, culture and civilization, is awakened by a monkey. It signifies how nature and culture, interacting each other, could result in a greater harmony. The closely knitted vegetal network protects the hill against the foreign kings. The vegetal autonomy resists the state power and divine kingship.

In Auvaiyar's *Purananuru* 187, the poet claims that there is no such thing as good earth (Ramanujan 159). The goodness of any field, forest, valley or hill depends on the goodness of the humans who inhabit the place. This relational politics subverts the trope of an inherently violent wilderness. Humans need to have an ecological perspective to live in nature. Pari's Perambu hill and Aye's Pothiyil hill were good because the humans of those hills were good too. Though Auvaiyar's poem is part of the hierarchical social order of the *Sangam*, it can still be open to interpretation. The poem warns men who would exploit nature for their own benefit. War destroys the biosphere.

The environment before and after the war has been described in *Patirruppattu* 13 (Ramanujan 189-190). This poem, composed by the poet, Kumattur Kannanar, eulogises the Cera king Imayavarampan Netunceralatan. Before the war, ecology is presented with tranquillity and peace: fences of Lilies, cows, queen's flower full of bird cries etc. After the war, the vegetal abundance of the flora has disappeared. The subsequent desolation is conveyed through water canals that dried up, leaving parched land behind. King's anger, the military expedition and invasion have destroyed nature. Despite all these changes in enemy territory, the king's homeland remains fertile. The poet praises the king: "great one, your land blossoms everywhere" (Ramanujan 190). The contrasts, between pre-war and post-war ecology, the fate of enemy land ravaged by the king, and how he protects his own land, are elaborated through vegetal metaphors. The change of seasons, the blossoming/flowering of plants, and its withering determine the landscape as a whole. A warrior king was also expected to be generous

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towards poor bards and poets (Hart and Heitetz xviii). An ancient Tamil king had to be generous in his homeland and frightening in the enemy territory. In *Purananuru* 12, the poet Nettimaiyar looks beyond the victories of king Peruvaluti (Ramanujan 113). After the war, the king's bards are gifted with lotuses of gold. However, the wealth came from plundering other men's lands. The uprooting of the vegetation of the enemy land is contrasted with the unwavering, artificial and courtly symbolism of the golden lotus. The land destroyed was remembered through the embodied memory of the absent flower, the aquatic lotus. "Lotuses of gold and flowers no bees will touch" are the expected gifts for a poet seeking a patron in a king (Ramanujan 128). The poet has travelled long through the arid lands/nature/chaos to reach the king's abode/culture/order. In "Harvest of War", agricultural motif of harvest is used to describe the war (Ramanujan 115). Carrion, headless bodies and blood are harvested. The focus on battlefield's abundance and the regenerative cycle of life and death emphasises war as a natural order. Like seasons interfere, renew and rebirth, king's expeditions reorder the political climate.

In *Purananuru* 157, chieftain Eraikkon was praised for his Valour. He was described as a tiger who sits on the mountain top and listens to his people. Through the tiger is of a ferocious nature, Eraikkon's restrained behaviour is highlighted in the poem. He leads his people, who were described as "the herds of deer", who do not know where to go. He wears "a wreath of red glory lilies on his head" (Ramanujan 157). There are contradictory elements at play here. Red glory lilies symbolize battlefield and military skills of the mountain clan. Tiger also symbolises war and violence. However, the fighter on the battlefield is also a patient leader to his people. The contrast has been efficiently translated into the poem.

A plant knows, sees, smells, tastes, feels, hears and remembers (Chamovitz 2017). An analysis of how humans write plants in literary and cultural discourses reveals the interplay, dynamics, possibility and the limitations of human language. In literature, the question of the co-existence of plants and humans has been a significant concern since time immemorial. The interlayering of plant language and human language enables a poem to function according to the principles of ecopoetics.

Conclusion

The intersectional imagination in *Sangam* poetry is intertwined with landscapes and plants. The bioregional imagination explores "the possibilities for living locally in bioregions and globally within the biosphere" (Ryan, *Plants* 8). Different regional varieties of plants are abundantly mentioned in *Sangam* poetry. The recorded history of plants, in its particularity and in relation

to the biosphere, in these poems forms the botanical poetics of *Sangam* poetry. The plant historicity is also elaborated through cognition, agency, memory and sensory perceptions. Poets imagining the multidimensional existence of plants in harmony with animals, humans, etc. enter a field of "poetisphere" (Ryan, *Plants* 9). Plant writing also recognizes "the poem as an ecosystem" (Ryan, *Plants* 16-17). *Sangam* poetry is also botanical poetry. Hence, *Sangam* poetry as plant writing opens new possibilities for reading and decoding the intersubjective dialogues between plants and non-plants.

The vegetal dialectic in *Sangam* poetry progresses through differences and similarities between plants and non-plants. The contrasting ideas, images, memories, perceptions, metaphors, and meanings combine to form a new understanding about the nature of plant life. Thereby, human lives in these poems are also rewritten by plants. The lives of poetic characters, poets, bards, chieftains and warriors are mediated through plants and landscapes in *Sangam* poems. Plants, reflecting the human psyche, create a language to help them navigate both their inner world and the outside environment. The reciprocal relationship between plants and non-plants spatializes the history, society and culture of *Sangam* age.

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