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Pearls and Pearls diving in Sangam Literature: Symbolism, Economy, and Cultural Imagination

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ABSTRACT

Pearls occupy a significant place in Sangam literature, functioning not merely as objects of ornamentation but as complex cultural symbols. This paper examines the multifaceted representation of pearls in major Sangam texts such as Akanānūru, Naṟṟinai, Pathitṟupattu, and Maduraikanchi. It explores how pearls operate across both akam (interior) and puram (exterior) traditions, symbolizing beauty, emotional states, political authority, economic activity, and ecological imagination. Special attention is given to the practice of pearl diving (muthu kulithal), as depicted in these texts, highlighting the labor, skill, and maritime knowledge of the Parathavar community, as well as the risks and rituals associated with the profession. The study also emphasizes the role of pearls in articulating feminine subjectivity, royal power, and coastal economies. By analyzing literary references and thematic contexts, this paper argues that pearls, together with the cultural practice of pearl diving, serve as a unifying motif that connects the inner emotional world with the outer material, social, and ecological realities of ancient Tamil society.

KEYWORDS: Pearl diving Pearls; Akam and Puram; Tamil Culture; Maritime Economy; Symbolism; Korkai; Pāndya Kingdom.

Introduction:

Sangam literature contains many references to the splendor of pearls. During that era, the pearl diving industry flourished in the Pandyan realm. The pearls produced in the Pandyan kingdom attained global fame, reaching as far as Rome. This specific term Muthuchalapam refers to the organized diving expeditions where skilled divers would plunge into the deep sea to collect oyster shells. This verse by the Tamil poetess Avvaiyar is summary of the unique strengths of the four major regions of ancient Tamil Nadu

The Hills of Chera elephants' might,
The Chola plains of grain so bright,



The Pandya south where pearls are found,
But Tondai's fields with saints abound. (*Thanippadalkal* 82)

In the harbor where great ships dock, laden with treasures from distant lands, the brave pearl divers plunge into the deep. They bring forth shining pearls and branching coral, alongside the white-spiraled shells, gathered from the churning, salt-rich sea.

In Sangam literature, particularly in texts such as *Akanānūru*, *Natrinai*, *Pathitruppathu*, and *Maduraikanchi*, pearls are represented as powerful cultural symbols that extend far beyond their material value. They appear across both *akam* (love) and *puram* (war) traditions, reflecting the interconnected nature of ancient Tamil life. In *akam* poetry, pearls are closely associated with feminine beauty and emotional expression: the heroine's teeth are often compared to the radiant pearls of Korkai, and her body is adorned with pearl garlands and anklets that enhance her grace and sensuality. At the same time, the image of an "unpolished pearl" conveys emotional nuance, symbolizing innocence, restraint, or the early, unexpressed stages of love. Thus, pearls function as metaphors not only for physical beauty but also for inner psychological states such as longing, desire, and separation.

In *puram* contexts, pearls signify royal authority, wealth, and political power. Kings, especially the Pandya rulers, are depicted wearing magnificent pearl ornaments derived from their own coastal regions, emphasizing control over maritime resources and territorial dominance. Pearls are also distributed as gifts to poets and warriors, reinforcing systems of patronage, honor, and prestige. Beyond the court, pearls play a crucial role in the economic structure of Sangam society. The poems vividly describe pearl divers, coastal communities, and merchants engaged in the collection and trade of pearls alongside gold and other valuable goods, indicating a well developed maritime economy centered on port towns such as Korkai.

Moreover, pearls are deeply embedded in the ecological imagination of Sangam poetry. Natural elements like flower buds, dew drops, and even hailstones are compared to pearls, illustrating how the environment is interpreted through culturally valued objects. The sea, particularly in the Neythal landscape, is portrayed as a generous source of pearls, directly linking nature with prosperity and livelihood. At the social level, pearls are integrated into everyday life as ornaments worn by women and children, symbolizing status, aesthetic taste, and cultural identity. Taken together, the representation of pearls in Sangam literature reveals a complex symbolic network in which beauty; emotion, power, economy, and ecology converge. Pearls thus function as a unifying motif that connects the inner world of human experience with the outer world of material culture, making them central to understanding the cultural imagination of ancient Tamil society

*Pāndiyan king with a chest desired by Thirumakal
is adorned beautifully with two huge garlands,
one with pearls born in his ocean, and one with
sandalwood, from his mountain ,(Akanānūru 13, Perunthalai Sāthanār, Pālai Thinai)*

In this verse from *Akanānūru 13* by Perunthalai Sāthanār, the image of the pearl plays a rich symbolic and cultural role, going far beyond mere ornamentation. What the heroine's friend said to the hero The Pāndiyan king is described as wearing two grand garlands one made of pearls from the sea and the other of sandalwood from the mountains. This dual imagery is deeply significant. The pearl, "born in his ocean," represents the maritime wealth of the Pāndiyan kingdom. In Sangam literature, pearls are not only precious objects but also markers of economic prosperity, trade, and royal power. The coastal regions under Pāndiyan



rule were famous for pearl fisheries, making pearls a natural symbol of sovereignty over the sea and its resources. At the same time, the pearl carries an aesthetic connotation. The king's chest is said to be desired by Thirumakal (Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth), and the pearl garland enhances this association. By adorning the king with pearls, the poem elevates him to a near-divine status, suggesting that he is both materially prosperous and spiritually blessed. The contrast between the pearl (from the sea) and sandalwood (from the mountains) also reflects the idea of territorial completeness. The king's rule spans diverse ecological zones *neital* (coastal) and *kurinji* (mountainous). Thus, the pearl becomes a political symbol, indicating not just wealth but also the extent and integration of his kingdom. It subtly communicates that his authority is total, encompassing all landscapes and their resources.

In the emotional context of the poem (a *Pālai thinai* situation, typically associated with separation and hardship), this grand description of the king serves as an indirect message to the hero. The heroine's friend invokes the king's glory to suggest ideals of responsibility, valor, and worthiness. The pearl, therefore, also functions rhetorically it elevates the standard against which the hero is measured.

*His leaving will be blocked
by your smile with bright teeth
in your coral-colored mouth,
resembling pearls from the wide
shores of Korkai town (Akanānūru 27, Mathurai Kanakkāyanār, Pālai Thinai)*

In the emotional context of the poem (a *Pālai thinai* situation, typically associated with separation and hardship), this grand description of the king serves as an indirect message to the hero. The heroine's friend invokes the king's glory to suggest ideals of responsibility, valor, and worthiness. The pearl, therefore, also functions rhetorically it elevates the standard against which the hero is measured.

*Will your pride be ruined if you come to the
fragrant seashore grove where punnai tree
buds look like unwashed pearls and ask us
about our beauty and then leave? (Akanānūru 30, Mudangi Kidantha Neduncheralāthan, Neythal
Thinai)*

In this verse from *Akanānūru 30* set in the Neythal (seashore) landscape, the image of the pearl is used to convey the natural and unrefined beauty of the heroine. The buds of the punnai tree are compared to "unwashed pearls," suggesting something pure, fresh, and untouched by artificial adornment. This reflects the heroine's own beauty, which is simple and inherent rather than decorated. At the same time, pearls are valuable objects associated with the sea, reinforcing the coastal setting of the poem. However, describing them as "unwashed" also implies that their worth is not fully recognized or appreciated. Through this image, the heroine's friend subtly questions the hero's intentions whether he merely comes to admire her beauty and leave, without truly valuing or committing to it. Thus, the pearl functions as a symbol of natural beauty, hidden value, and the emotional concern of being admired but not truly cherished.

.....your breasts adorned with
..... a pearl strand with sparkling
..... rays like the eyes of a wild cat,.



In *Akanānūru* 73 (Pālai thinai), the pearl strand symbolizes more than beauty. Its sharp, sparkling rays compared to a wild cat's eyes suggest strength, alertness, and inner resilience. While pearls usually represent purity and refinement, here they also reflect the heroine's dignity and emotional control despite suffering. Thus, the pearl highlights that she is not weak or naïve, but a woman of firm virtue and quiet strength.

*The lord, comes alone at night when
new hailstones hit elephants on their faces
with spots that appear like pearls strewn
on hills, (Akanānūru 108, Thankāl Porkollanār, Kurinji Thinai)*

In *Akanānūru* (108), pearls are used as a simile to describe hailstones striking the elephants, where the white spots on their faces resemble pearls scattered across the hills. This imagery adds visual beauty to an otherwise harsh natural scene and elevates it with a sense of rarity and preciousness. At the same time, the pearl image reflects the delicate and fleeting nature of the lovers' secret night meeting in *Kurinji thinai*, where moments of union are brief yet deeply valuable.

*You certainly have no shame! ...
eyes like tender green mangoes,
and a pearl strand moving on her beautiful breasts. (Akanānūru 116, Paranar, Marutham Thinai)*

In *Akanānūru* (116), the pearl strand worn by the woman plays an important symbolic role. It enhances her physical beauty, especially as it rests and moves on her breasts, drawing attention to her elegance and charm. At the same time, pearls signify sensuality, refinement, and desirability, fitting the Marutham thinai context, which often deals with love, relationships, and infidelity. The movement of the pearl necklace also subtly suggests intimacy and emotional involvement, reinforcing the poem's theme of the hero's secret liaison with another woman.

*swarms of bees taste the fan-like, bright
flowers which are as white as pearls,
that spread like hailstones that are of the
color of shells, (Akanānūru 335, Mathurai Thathankannanār, Pālai Thinai)*

On the other hand other texts of sangam literature shows the term pearl in various context.

*On the sand-filled shores, adumpu
Those who live there find fabulous pearls and long
coral pieces from the cool ocean with delicate shores. (Pathiruppathu 30, Poet: Pālai Kouthamanār)*

This poem portrays the coastal landscape where people depend on the sea for their livelihood. The mention of "fabulous pearls" highlights their importance as a source of wealth and prosperity. The role of the pearl here is mainly economic it represents the livelihood of coastal communities and the richness of the sea. At the same time, it also signifies the identity of the Neythal region, known for its marine abundance. Thus, pearls function as symbols of wealth, livelihood, and natural abundance.

*Your young bull elephants with pearls in their tusks, trumpeted
and sprung to action with ferocity. (Pathiruppathu 32, Poet: Kāppiyatru Kāppiyānār)*

This poem presents a powerful image of war elephants ready for battle. The mention of pearls in their tusks highlights royal grandeur and strength. The role of the pearl here is symbolic of royal power and prestige. It shows the king's wealth and authority, as even war elephants are adorned with precious ornaments. At the

same time, it enhances the image of ferocity combined with magnificence. Thus, pearls function as symbols of power, wealth, and kingly splendor in a martial context.

*Oh talented bard
If you go and sing to our king with your renowned kin, he will
give you fine ornaments made in Kodumanam, and clear-ocean
pearls from the famous Pukhar town. (Pathitruppathu 67, Poet: Kapilar)*

The uniqueness of pearl representation in *Pathitruppathu* lies in its strong connection to kingship and public life, unlike the emotional and romantic symbolism seen in other Sangam texts. Here, pearls are not just ornaments but markers of territorial wealth (seashore abundance), royal power (linked with elephants and conquest), and generous patronage (given to poets as rewards). This makes pearls a symbol of political authority and economic prosperity, highlighting the glory and prestige of the ruling kings.

*Her ruined eyes, resembling beautiful
waterlilies with small leaves, growing
in the clear, abundant water on the
shores of Korkai, where pearls grow in
the ocean, are unable to hide her love. (Natrinaï 23, Kanakkāyanār, Kurinji Thinai)*

In this poem, the heroine's eyes are compared to waterlilies near Korkai, a place famous for pearls. The reference to pearls subtly reflects hidden emotional depth. Pearls symbolize unexpressed love and inner emotion. Just as pearls remain beneath the sea, her love cannot be concealed despite her effort to hide it.

*When a woman struggles with the pain
of love, and her strength has been lost,
it is only fitting for the man to talk in a
loving manner. I have well controlled
my feminine nature, and am like a new
pearl that has not been polished and made
pretty by the hands of a skilled craftsman. (Natrinaï 94, Ilanthiraiyanār, Neythal Thinai)*

The heroine compares herself to a new, unpolished pearl, expressing her emotional restraint and dignity despite love's pain. The pearl represents innocence, modesty, and restrained desire. The "unpolished" quality highlights her untouched, natural emotional state and self-control.

*My playful daughter's golden anklets filled
with pearls from clear waters, jingled as she
jumped and ran away, refusing the milk
they brought. (Natrinaï 110, Pothanār, Pālai Thinai)*

This poem depicts a playful young girl whose pearl-filled anklets jingle as she runs away, refusing milk. Here, pearls symbolize innocence, childhood joy, and domestic life. They reflect purity and lively energy within a familial setting.

In *Natrinai*, the representation of pearls is uniquely interior and psychological, moving beyond material value to signify states of emotion and feminine subjectivity. Pearls function as metaphors for unarticulated love (verse 23), unformed identity and restrained desire (the “unpolished pearl” in verse 94), and innocent vitality within domestic space (verse 110). Unlike other Sangam texts that associate pearls with wealth or power, *Natrinai* internalizes the image, using it to trace the subtle transitions of love, modesty, and emotional vulnerability. This inward turn marks its individuality, where pearls become not objects of display but embodiments of the heroine’s inner life and evolving emotional consciousness.

*O warrior king! You uplift your friendly
citizens! You seize kingships of enemies!
The wise praise your flourishing greatness!
You are loved by the citizens of fine Korkai
town with abundant toddy, where those who
dive for mature, splendid pearls and bright
conch, reside in large streets. (Madurai kanchi 137)
Bright pearls given by the roaring ocean,*

beautiful, bright bangles made by cutting
conch shells with saws, various food (Madurai kanchi 305)
There are merchants who buy lovely gems, pearls
and gold and sell imported things from fine (Madurai kanchi 500)

In Maduraikanchi, pearls are portrayed as a key element of urban economy, maritime culture, and political prestige. The reference to Korkai highlights a thriving coastal center where pearl divers form an essential community, showing pearls as a product of specialized labor and coastal livelihood. In the description of the Neythal landscape, pearls are presented as gifts of the sea, emphasizing natural abundance and ecological richness. Further, in the merchant scenes, pearls appear as valuable trade commodities alongside gems and gold, indicating their role in long-distance trade and economic networks. Thus, pearls in Maduraikanchi uniquely signify the integration of nature, labor, commerce, and royal prosperity within an urban framework.

Pearl Diving

Places in the sea where pearls were formed were called *salabam*. Pearl fishing was known as *muthu salabam* (pearl fishery), and the term *salabam* itself came to mean pearl diving. Some also referred to it as *silabam*. Similarly, coral fishing was called *pavala salabam* (coral fishery). Pearl divers would go out into the sea in boats and dive for pearls. The owner of the boat was known as the *sammatti*. They functioned as organized groups. Those who dived underwater to collect pearl oysters and conch shells were called *kuliyaligal* (divers). Trained divers of the Parathavar community, skilled in proper diving techniques, would tie a net around their waists and plunge into the sea. They would spread the net, gather pearl oysters from the seabed, return to the surface, and empty them into the boats, taking brief rests before diving again. This process continued from morning until evening. In the evening, the collected oysters and shells were brought ashore, spread out on the sand, and broken open to extract the pearls within. Identifying the beds of pearl oysters and freshwater pearl mussels mollusks that thrive in deeper marine region required specialized training and skill. Parathavar pearl divers were often at risk of shark attacks. To protect themselves, they are said to have recited a charm known as “*sura vashiyam*” to ward off sharks.



As described in *Akananuru* (verse 350), the Parathavars, who removed attacking sharks, dived deep into the roaring sea and brought up conch shells, creating a resounding scene in the flourishing port of Korkai.

*Look there! There appears our fine
small village, with tall sand dunes
where fishermen with large boats
dive into the bright, large ocean
for right-whorled conch, avoiding
shark attacks, who are welcomed to
the sounds of blowing conch shells
and uproars in splendid Korkai town*

Another verse (*Akananuru* 296) notes that the Parathavars who gathered various kinds of fish also brought pearl oysters and conches from the sea and sold them, contributing to the prosperity and fame of Korkai. in Koodal city with tall mansions,

*of Pāndiyan king Nedunchezhiyan with
victorious spears, tall chariots, and fierce,
arrogant elephants, lord of Korkai city of
great fame, where those who catch many
fish sell the seashells they collect, to buy
joyful liquor that is filtered with fiber.*

The sea between Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu is relatively shallow, which facilitated pearl diving. The Parathavars possessed both the skill and the hereditary right to engage in pearl fishing. They were supported by the Pandya rulers, who, during periods of their power, granted them exemptions from general taxation and ensured their protection. As a result, the Parathavars enjoyed certain privileges and operated with a degree of autonomy. The professional pearl divers among them were known as *kuliyaligal*. They specialized in both pearl diving and conch diving as their primary occupation.

Narratives on Pearl diving

Pearl diving in the Tuticorin (Thoothukudi) region was not an individual activity but a deeply structured and culturally regulated practice. According to local belief and customary norms, a diver would never venture into the sea alone; he was accompanied specifically by his maternal uncle. This choice was not incidental but rooted in kinship ethics and social trust. Brothers and paternal cousins collectively referred to as “pangali” (co-sharers of ancestral property) were generally excluded from this role due to the potential for internal conflicts, particularly over property and inheritance. Such tensions were believed to compromise the diver’s safety. The maternal uncle, by contrast, occupied a position of responsibility and care within the family structure. During the dive, while the diver descended underwater to collect oyster shells, the maternal uncle remained in the boat, holding the rope tied to the diver. When the diver experienced difficulty in holding his breath, he would signal by shaking the rope, upon which the maternal uncle would immediately pull him back to safety. This role required constant vigilance, as the uncle was entrusted not only with assisting in the task but also with safeguarding the diver’s life. In the event of any mishap, the maternal uncle was considered morally and socially accountable as the family’s caretaker. Once collected, the oyster shells were



gathered in large heaps along the seashore. The sale of these shells typically occurred in bulk, often attracting buyers who would purchase them before opening. Historical accounts indicate that during the pre- and post-Independence periods, the price of these shells varied modestly, ranging from 10 paise to 3 rupees. In contemporary times, however, their value has increased significantly. After purchase, the shells were opened sometimes at the buyer's premises to extract pearls. The outcome was uncertain: occasionally, a fully formed pearl would be found; at other times, only small or underdeveloped pearls appeared, and often, the shells yielded nothing at all. Thus, pearl diving and trading involved not only physical risk but also economic uncertainty. This account is based on oral testimonies collected from local informants, including Swaminathan (aged 85) and GandhiMadhi Ammal (aged 95), who shared their lived experiences of pearl diving practices and the associated systems of sale and distribution in the Tuticorin region.

Conclusion

Pearls in Sangam texts are not just ornaments; they are cultural signifiers that connect the inner world (love, emotion) with the outer world (economy, politics, and ecology). Through pearls, the literature creates a unified vision of life where nature, human emotion, and material culture are deeply intertwined. In Sangam literature, particularly in texts such as *Akanānūru*, *Natrinai*, *Pathitruppathu*, and *Maduraikanchi*, pearls are represented as powerful cultural symbols that extend far beyond their material value. They appear in diverse contexts love poetry, royal praise, ecological description, and economic activity thereby reflecting the interconnected nature of ancient Tamil society. In the akam tradition, pearls are frequently used to describe feminine beauty and emotional states. The heroine's teeth are likened to the radiant pearls of Korkai, while her ornaments, such as anklets and garlands, are adorned with pearls that enhance her physical and sensual presence. At the same time, the metaphor of an "unpolished pearl" suggests emotional restraint, innocence, or the early stages of love, showing how pearls embody inner psychological experiences. In the puram context, pearls become symbols of royal authority and political power. Kings, especially the Pandya king, are described as wearing magnificent pearl ornaments sourced from their own coastal regions, indicating control over natural resources and maritime wealth. These pearls are also distributed as gifts to poets and warriors, reinforcing systems of patronage and prestige. Beyond the court, pearls play a crucial role in the economic life of the society. The poems vividly portray pearl divers, coastal communities, and merchants who collect, trade, and exchange pearls along with other valuable commodities, suggesting a vibrant maritime economy centered around coastal towns like Korkai. Furthermore, pearls are deeply embedded in the ecological imagination of Sangam poetry. Natural elements such as flower buds, hailstones, and ocean waves are often compared to pearls, illustrating how the environment is perceived through culturally significant objects. The sea, in particular, is portrayed as a life-giving force that produces pearls, linking nature directly with prosperity and livelihood. At the social level, pearls are part of everyday life, appearing in personal adornments and symbolizing status, beauty, and cultural identity. Thus, the representation of pearls in Sangam literature reveals a complex symbolic network in which beauty, emotion, power, economy, and ecology converge, making pearls an essential motif that bridges the inner and outer worlds of ancient Tamil culture.

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