



Kalanjiyam International Journal of Tamil Studies
களஞ்சியம் - சர்வதேசத் தமிழ் ஆய்விதழ்

Peer-Reviewed | Open Access | Crossref DOI &
Global Indexing | Google Scholar Impact Factor
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63300/kijts05sp042026.11>
<https://ngmtamil.in/>



Signifying Adornment: A Semiotic and Performative Reading of Madhavi's Anikal in Silappadikaram

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Article Info

Received on 15-April-2026, Revised on 18-April-2026, Accepted on 20-April-2026, Published on 01-May-2026

ABSTRACT

In Silappadikaram, the cultural symbolism of anikal is vividly expressed through the character of Madhavi, whose adorned body reflects the intricate interplay of meaning, identity and aesthetics within the Tamil classical tradition. Rather than serving merely as decorative embellishments, these anikal function as a system of signs that convey multifaceted meanings associated with womanhood, artistic sophistication, and social presence. Through the lens of semiotic theory, specifically drawing upon the works of Roland Barthes- adornment can be understood as a form of cultural signification that encapsulates aesthetic values and construct identity, thereby transforming material objects into carriers of meaning.

At the same time, Madhavi's ornament takes on a distinctly performative dimension, where the ornamented body becomes a dynamic site of artistic expression. Inspired by performance theory, particularly Richard Schechner, the anikal actively contributes to the performance by intensifying movement, generating rhythm, and shaping visual form, thereby expanding the expressive potential of the dancing body. Ornaments such as anklets, bangles, and necklaces are not external objects but integral components of the performance, contributing to the creation of a multisensory aesthetic experience. Placed at the intersection of meaning and performance, Madhavi's adornment demonstrates the importance of material objects in the construction of aesthetic identity in Silappadikaram. This paper explores the cultural symbolism of the anikal in terms of symbolic meaning and performative embodiment through the character of Madhavi..

Keywords: Anikal (ornaments), Madhavi, Silappadikaram, Semiotics, Performance Theory



Introduction

The classical tradition of Tamil literature that flourished during the Sangam periods reflects a sophisticated cultural world in which poetry, social life, and artistic expression were deeply intertwined. Sangam texts systematically categorized human experience into *akam* (inner, emotional life) and *puram* (outer, public life). Demonstrating how art, emotion, and daily practices coexist within a shared cultural framework. It is in this milieu that *Silappadikaram*, often translated as *The Tale of an Anklet*, by Ilango Adigal, emerges as a significant cultural work. This narrative foregrounds Kannagi and her moral authority, while simultaneously presenting a rich portrayal of Tamil cultural life, where material elements such as *anikal* (ornaments) and performance traditions play a pivotal role in shaping identity and expression.

In this context, the distinction between Kannagi and Madhavi illustrates how ornamentation functions as a specific system of meaning. Kannagi's anklets symbolize purity and moral virtue within the domestic sphere, whereas Madhavi's various ornaments are embedded in a performative and aesthetic context associated with visibility, artistry, and cultural sophistication. This contrast highlights how a single physical form can acquire diverse meanings depending on its specific social and narrative context.

In Tamil aesthetic traditions, ornamentation is not merely decorative; rather, it constitutes an integral part of the body's expressive potential. In Madhavi's performances, the interplay of movement, sound, and ornamentation transforms the body into a dynamic aesthetic form, wherein the ornaments actively shape artistic expression.

In this context, the study analyzes Madhavi's ornamentation from the dual perspectives of semiotics and performance theory. Drawing on the works of Roland Barthes and Richard Schechner, this study explores how ornaments function as culturally symbolic signs and also participate in performance. It argues that Madhavi's *anikal* operate at the intersection of meaning and performance, thereby contributing to the construction of a distinct performative aesthetic identity within *Silappadikaram*.

***Anikal* as Semiotic Signs: Constructing Meaning, Identity, and Cultural Value through Madhavi**

The significance of ornaments in *Silappadikaram* extends far beyond its mere physical presence; it functions as a system of signs through which identity, aesthetics, and cultural values are articulated. From the perspective of Roland Barthes, *anikal* can be understood as signifiers that embody culturally constructed meanings. Physical objects such as anklets, bangles, or necklaces- serve as signifiers, while the meanings associated with them like femininity, artistic sophistication, and social status, constitute the signified. Within this framework, ornaments become a language through which the body is read and interpreted. These meanings are deeply embedded in Tamil cultural practices, where ornamentation plays a central role in expressing femininity, artistry and social affiliation.

When viewed in the context of both Kannagi and Madhavi, this semiotic framework becomes even more nuanced. In Kannagi's case, her *silambu* (anklet) functions as a distinct and ethically significant symbol associated with purity, marital fidelity, and domestic virtue. Its significance is rooted in the private sphere, where the ornament is served as an emblem of moral integrity and marital identity. The anklet ultimately evolves into a symbol of truth and justice, thereby reinforcing her status as the ideal chaste wife. In contrast, Madhavi's anklet operates within a broader and more performative semiotic realm, where meaning is distributed across multiple ornaments and is intertwined with visibility, artistry, and public identity.

In *Silappadikaram*, the symbolic significance of ornaments becomes particularly evident through the contrasting characters of Kannagi and Madhavi, who together represent two distinct yet culturally valued dimensions of Tamil society. Madhavi, presented in *Puharkantam* during her *arangetram* at the Chola court,

appears as highly ornamented *Varalar* (prostitute -performer), whose anklets, girdles, necklaces, and elaborate hair ornaments signify not only beauty but also her professional identity, royal patronage, and high artistic status. As described, "Her anklets jingled in a rhythmic beat and her ornate body moved in perfect harmony with the music" (Parthasarathy, *Arangetru-kathai*), demonstrating how her jewelry is activated in performance-the rhythmic sound of anklets, the shimmer of the jewelry, and the movement of the girdle, transforming her body into a symbolic and aesthetic space where meaning is produced through movement and spectacle.

In contrast, the early sections of the *Puharkandam* also provide a detailed portrayal of Kannagi, a *Pattini* (chaste wife). Her body adorned with her *tali* (nuptial pendant) and *silambu* (anklets) symbolizes domestic virtue, fidelity, and moral integrity as Kannagi is depicted wearing her marital ornaments, symbolizing her chastity and moral virtue (Parthasarathy, 1993, p. 48). Although both women wear ornaments, its significance differs profoundly: for Madhavi, it signifies artistic identity, sensuality, and public recognition; for Kannagi, it symbolizes marital status, moral strength, and inner restraint. This distinction becomes the most evident in the episode involving the anklet, wherein Kannagi declares, "The anklet I wear is filled with rubies;

the queen's anklet is filled with pearls." (Parthasarthy, 20, 89) thereby transforming the *silambu* into a potent symbol of truth, justice, and identity. Here, the anklet also reflects the regional material culture, pointing to the availability of specific gemstones and the economic networks embedded within the narrative. Similarly, the *tali* situate Kannagi within the institution of marriage, reinforcing her role within the domestic sphere, whereas Madhavi's elaborate ornamentation signifies her status within the public, performative realm.

Through these parallel presentations, the epic demonstrates how jewelry functions as a cultural signifier that distinguishes female roles- Madhavi as an accomplished artist and Kannagi as an ideal homemaker, while simultaneously highlighting the prosperity of Tamil society wherein both artistic excellence and moral virtue are recognized and valued.

Within the detailed description of Madhavi's ornaments, a distinct semiotic structure emerges, wherein each ornament is meticulously linked to a specific part of the body, thereby enhancing both her beauty and her expressive potential. The text carefully delineates the materials and designs of these ornaments, as evidenced in the description: "bangles of pure gold, bangles of conch shell. And bangles of coral" (Parthasarathy, Puhar Section, 60). These bangles serve as symbols of expressive femininity and continuity. In Tamil cultural contexts, bangles are associated with vitality and emotional fulfilments, while their circular form suggests wholeness. Their movement renders gestures whether in everyday life or in performance, even more evocative. In Madhavi's case, they provide a framework for her body's expressive movements, symbolizing grace and culturally sanctioned femininity, thereby reinforcing her identity as both an artist and an aesthetic subject.

Her adorned body is further embellished by an accumulation of ornaments- bracelets, necklaces, and waistbands which collectively form a structured visual system. The line, "And around her waist was tied a waistband of thirty-two strands of large pearls" (Parthasarathy, Puhar Section, 60), highlights the waistband as a significant symbol. In Tamil aesthetic traditions, the waistband is intimately linked with balance, proportion, and controlled sensuality. It emphasizes physical discipline and grace, establishing Madhavi's identity as a culturally refined artistic persona shaped by ideals of beauty and restraint.

The semiotic function of the ornamentation is further expanded through its connection to the economic and social structures. Following her performance, Madhavi is rewarded with "one thousand and eight gold coins- the customary gift given to dancers" (Parthasarathy, *Arangetru-kathai*, 39), thereby linking

artistic excellence with material recognition and reinforcing ornamentation as a symbol of patronage, reward, and artistic value.

In Tamil culture, gold ornaments symbolize wealth, patronage and prestige. These ornaments signify both economic capital and social recognition, thus positioning Madhavi within a courtly framework where artistic prowess receives institutional validation. Her adorned body becomes a visible symbol of high social status, reflecting the intricate interplay between aesthetics and social hierarchy.

Placing together, Madhavi's ornaments constitute a complex semiotic system in which each element contributes to the construction of identity while simultaneously reflecting broader Tamil cultural values. The anklets symbolize performance and rhythm; the waist-belt signifies aesthetic balance and femininity; and the bangles convey vitality and continuity. In contrast to Kannagi's singular, domestic jewelry, Madhavi's profusion of ornaments constructs a public and performative identity. Thus, in the *Silappadikaram*, ornament emerges as a distinct cultural language through which identity is not merely represented but actively produced. Even when compared to Kannagi, Madhavi's ornaments feel more dynamic, as their meaning depends on performance and public visibility rather than fixed moral values

***Anikal* as Performative Elements: Embodiment, Self- Expression, and Cultural Aesthetics**

While a semiotic reading explains how *anikal* function as carriers of meaning, their full significance in *Silappadikaram* emerges through performance, where meaning is not merely signified but enacted. In the figure of Madhavi, ornaments are not passive objects but integral components of embodied expression, participating directly in the creation of aesthetic experience.

This performative dimension may be understood through Richard Schechner's concept of performance as "restored behaviour," which refers to actions that are rehearsed, repeated, and culturally transmitted (Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 35). Madhavi's dance in *The First Performance*, exemplifies such a structured practice, as reflected in the description that "she measured out three and ended with one and completed them with five beats" (Parthasarathy, *Arangetru-kathai*, 39). Her performance is not spontaneous but shaped by codified tradition, where rhythm, gesture, and movement follow established aesthetic norms. Within this framework, *anikal* become part of this "twice-behaved behavior," functioning as culturally embedded elements that the expressive capacity of the performing body.

In this context, the role of the *anikal* is not just purely symbolic but functional and embodied. The anklet, for instance, does not simply signify Madhavi's identity as a dancer; they generate rhythm, converting bodily movement into sound. According to Schechner, performance extends beyond the body to include objects and costume, which together form a unified expressive system. Madhavi's *anikal* operate as extensions of the body, allowing the translation of movement into a multisensory aesthetic experience that engages both sound and sight.

Similarly, the visual dimension of performance is shaped through adornment. As evident in the text, the ornaments such as bangles intensify and frame bodily gesture (*Silappadikaram*). These ornaments guide the audience's perception, highlighting movement and enhancing expressive clarity. The waist chain further contributes to this articulation by structuring bodily posture and emphasizing balance, aligning the performer's body with culturally defined ideals of grace and proportion within Tamil aesthetic traditions.

Furthermore, adding to this context, performance is not merely a technical execution but rather a form of self-expression. Through repeated and disciplined presentation, Madhavi realizes her role as a dancer, transforming inner emotions into outward forms. Her *anikal* play a central role in this process as they enable the body to convey meaning more effectively. In this sense, identity is not pre-established but is

continuously constructed through performance, wherein the adorned body becomes the medium through which cultural values are articulated.

The performative function of ornaments is also interwoven with cultural and social dimensions. Through gold ornaments, Madhavi's identity and accolades position her within a system of patronage where artistic performance receives material recognition. These *anikal*, when integrated into her adorned body, reinforce her status and visibility within a cultural framework that values both aesthetic excellence and social recognition.

Thus, from the perspective of performance, the *anikal* in *Silappadikaram* are not supplementary to the performance but constitute an integral part of it. They extend the body, generate rhythm, structure movement, and enhance the visual expression, transforming the performance into a multisensory cultural experience. In the case of Madhavi, ornamentation becomes inseparable from the performance, demonstrating that identity is not merely signified but is enacted through the continuous interplay of the body, jewellery and cultural practice. It appears that in Madhavi's performance, the ornaments do not accompany the dance but become part of it, making the performance feel incomplete without them.

Interplay of Signification and Performance: The Adorned Body as Cultural Text

In *Silappadikaram*, the significance of the *anikal* is fully revealed at the convergence of meaning and performance, a realm where meaning is neither solely inherent in the objects themselves nor entirely generated through movement, but rather emerges through their continuous interplay within the Tamil cultural framework. In the figure of Madhavi, *anikal* functions not merely as static symbols or purely performative devices, but as culturally rooted elements through which identity is both constructed and performed.

The focus on the rhythmic precision of Madhavi - "she measured out three and ended with one and completed them with five beats" (Parthasarathy, *Arangetru-kathai*, 39), foregrounds disciplined movement as primary mode of expression. Within the Tamil performance tradition, such structured movement is inseparable from adornment, as the body is culturally marked through *anikal*. The significance of ornament here lies not in visual description but in its activation through performance. The adorned body becomes intelligible only in motion, where rhythm, gesture, and ornaments together curate meaning. Thus, *anikal* does not merely signify identity in advance; it enables to be realized through culturally codified performance.

This relationship becomes even more layered when considering Madhavi's elaborate adornment while Bathing in the sea, where Madhavi's adorned body is presented as a structured aesthetic composition. In Tamil cultural aesthetics, such adornment symbolizes refinement, poise, and femininity. However, these meanings remain incomplete without display. Ornaments achieves its full expressive power when it interacts with the moving body, making visible the cultural values it embodies. The same *anikal* that symbolizes femininity and prestige also participates in displaying these qualities, transforming abstract cultural ideals into lived, perceptible experiences.

This interaction emphasizes that Madhavi's identity cannot be found in a single dimension- neither in her performance nor in the symbolic meaning of her ornaments. Rather, identity develops as a continuous cultural process moulded by repeated embodied expression. Each time her *anikal*, which possess their roots in Tamil adornment traditions, are employed in a performance, they acquire new significance, and the performance itself derives legitimacy and meaning from these culturally recognized forms. In that manner, performance and ornament serve as complementary means of navigating and displaying identity.

Likewise, this interaction demonstrates how Tamil tradition's aesthetic, cultural, and social dimensions are fundamentally interconnected. The adorned body performs cultural ideals compared to

simply pondering them, showing the association among recognition, discipline, and beauty. As an outcome, Madhavi's presence becomes figurative rather than representational; the combination of material adornment and embodied practice continually establishes her identity as a dancer, a socially prominent performer, and a culturally refined feminine subject.

Thus, the interplay of signification and performance in *Silappadikaram* redefines ornamentation as a dynamic cultural process rather than a fixed attribute. In Madhavi's case, *anikal* transform the body into a living cultural text in which the meaning is performed, negotiated, and reconstituted, instead of simply recorded. This ongoing interaction allows aesthetic identity to fully emerge, revealing how Tamil cultural values are expressed through the fundamental relationship between ornament, body and performance.

Thus, the interplay of signification and performance in *Silappadikaram* recasts ornamentation as a dynamic cultural process rather than a static attribute. In Madhavi's case, *anikal* transform the body into a living cultural text in which meaning is performed, negotiated, and reconstituted, instead of simply recorded. What stands out is that Madhavi's adorned body feels like something that is continuously being "read" and redefined through performance rather than remaining fixed. This ongoing redefinition allows aesthetic identity to fully emerge, revealing how Tamil cultural values are expressed through the fundamental connection between ornament, body, and performance.

Conclusion

The role of *anikal* in the *Silappadikaram* reveals a nuanced cultural framework in which adornment serves as a medium for symbolic expression within Tamil aesthetic traditions. Ornaments encapsulate values of sophistication, femininity, and artistic discipline, enhancing the adorned body to function as a focal point of meaning. In the Character of Madhavi, these meanings are not static but are instead realized through performance- a zestful process wherein movement and gesture transform cultural signifiers into vibrant expressions. What stands out is that Madhavi's identity depends on being seen in majority portions, and her ornaments play a key role in making her visible within a cultural and social space. The equation between adornment and performance successfully constructs identity as a continuous, lived process highly curbed by cultural practice and social convention. This study demonstrates that the *anikal* in *Silappadikaram* operates as a cultural language through identity within the Tamil Tradition is simultaneously signified and performed.

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