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Avvaiyar's Legacy in Purananuru

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ABSTRACT

In the classical Tamil anthology Purananuru, Avvaiyar is one of the female poets who stands out as the most prolific contributor. She has written a total of 33 songs. This paper explores her literary and philosophical legacy around the themes of friendship and political ethics and applies the ethics in solving contemporary issues. It focuses on her poems dedicated to Adhiyaman Neduman Anji, the ruler of Adhiyaman dynasty and a great friend of Avvaiyar. This examines the relationship between political authority and moral responsibility by exploring human experiences. Special attention is given to the incident where the king gives a rare, life-prolonging gooseberry (Nellikani) to Avvaiyar to make her wisdom immortal rather than his monarchy (mentioned in Songs 91, 206, 235). Beyond this personal bond, her verses (Songs 89, 90, 94) serve as a historical record of Adhiyaman's military prowess, his skill with the sword, and his strategic role in diplomacy such as calculated violence and correct aggression. Perhaps her most philosophical contribution is Song 187, where she famously declares that virtue of a land is not inherent in its soil but is defined by the goodness of the people who inhabit it. She also praises the next generation, as seen in Song 96, where she celebrates the strength and beauty of Adhiyaman's son, Poguttu Ezhini, thereby immortalizing the entire lineage's courage and generosity. In the Purananuru, the female poet who authored the highest number of songs is Avvaiyar (33 songs). Her famous verses emphasize themes such as generosity- rare gooseberry, Adhiyaman's heroic valor, martial bravery, political wisdom and the philosophical reflection on life.

Keywords: Avvaiyar, Sangam Literature, Ethical Kingship, Emotional Intelligence, Moral Philosophy

Introduction

Sangam literature is one of the earliest literary traditions in South Asia between 300BC and 300AD, focusing on love (*Akam*) and public life (*Puram*). It is composed by 473 poets offering a rich portrayal of political life, ethical values, emotional experience and describing all sorts of social relationships, which later compiled into anthologies like Ettutogai (8 idylls) and Pattupattu (10 idylls). Among the canonical anthologies,



Purananuru, which is a part of Ettuthokai and contains 400 poems. It reflects public life, kingship, war ethics and generosity. Purananuru stands as a foundational text within the *Puram* tradition, offering a rich archive of political thought and moral philosophy expressed through poetic expression. In this collection, the female poet Avvaiyar stands out as a remarkable voice, contributing thirty-three poems, mainly focusing on the chieftain Adhiyaman Neduman Anji. She was a highly respectable figure who moved between royal courts and acted as an intellectual advisor and an ambassador, and advised on wartime ethics and royal administration. Her poetry transcends artificial praise and does not focus on laudation but praise the generosity, wisdom and bravery. She therefore offers a nuanced blend of virtue, valor, wisdom, and ethical governance.

Avvaiyar was actually a Viraliyar, a classical performer who exhibits various emotions in her performance. Avvaiyar's poetic voice has its depth of emotional intelligence and moral clarity. She never gave emphasis on only martial glory and royal patronage but redefined this genre by including ethical reflection within public life. Her relationship with Adhiyaman becomes a literary space through which she articulates ideals of friendship and political ethics. In the famous Nellikani episode, in which the ruler got gifted a rare gooseberry believed to prolong life, however instead of consuming the fruit himself, Adhiyaman offers it to Avvaiyar, recognizing the value of her wisdom and understanding the importance of intellect in the society instead of power to rule. This act becomes a central symbolic moment in her poems, which shows how knowledge is prioritized over temporal power. Similarly, she believed that the worth of a land depends on the virtue of its people and used this belief in her writings. It reflects a human-centric vision of civilization. By integrating such reflections into Puram poetry, Avvaiyar constructs a model of kingship grounded in ethics, wisdom and moral responsibility.

This paper looks at Avvaiyar's poems in Purananuru to see how her work forms ethical kingship and emotional intelligence. By examining selected poems that describe Adhiyaman's courage, generosity, wisdom, diplomacy and lineage, it shows that Avvaiyar's contributions go beyond panegyric and include philosophical insights, which is relevant in the contemporary world as well. By closely reading her poems and relating her insights while she was advising the king and explaining about the morals in ruling and administration, her preachings can be adapted in the current world as well and could be used to solve contemporary issues such as violence in global politics, corruption, dismissal of scholars, short term decision making, aggressive leadership etc.

Avvaiyar in the Sangam Tradition

Avvaiyar occupies a unique place in Sangam literature as a female poet whose voice carries authority in political and ethical matters. She never focused solely on patronage but her poems are based on mutual respect and foreground moral and ethical responsibility. Her interaction with Adhiyaman Neduman Anji is filled with admiration for his deeds and valor. Through her verses, she both advises and praises the ruler while also reflecting on his actions, therefore presenting a layered understanding of kingship grounded in moral responsibility. These verses are from song 89, where she fiercely praises the king meanwhile reflecting his moral responsibility.

“பகைவர் மருங்கில் பாயும் வாள் உடையாய்

மக்கள் மருங்கில் அரண் போல நிற்பாய்”



“You wield a sword that strikes the enemy,
yet you stand like a fortress beside your people.”

This line symbolises heroism. The king is not praised for violence and aggression but for safeguarding his people, it depicts protective strength. Fortress is used as a metaphor to emphasize security and responsibility to the public. Avvaiyar writes that power becomes meaningful only when used for public welfare. In the contemporary world as well, leaders' first responsibility is to protect the nation and shall not focus on pursuing dominance and showing irrelevant aggression. Every decision has to be taken on keeping ethics on the top, biases must be removed and persons in authority making decisions must have wisdom and empathy. Similarly, the verse in 102 portrays the act of protecting what is right and giving justice.

“அஞ்சாத நெஞ்சம் உடையாய் ஆயினும்
அறம் காக்கும் செய்கையே மன்னன் பெருமை”

“Though fearless in heart,
a king's greatness lies in protecting righteousness.”

Avvaiyar separates fearlessness and believes courage alone is not enough for being an ideal king. The king may be fearless, but his true greatness lies in protecting justice. Thus, leadership demands moral responsibility. She preached that strength becomes meaningful only when aligned with righteousness. Avvaiyar also conveys that power must serve moral order, not personal ambition.

Her poetry reflects a balanced portrayal of valor and virtue. She celebrates his battlefield courage while emphasizing justice. This shows she is aware about social ethics and has a wide understanding of the world. In *Purananuru* (Song 187), she articulates an ethical vision:

“நல்லார் ஒருவர் உளரேல் அவர்பொருட்டு
எல்லாரும் நல்லர் ஆகுவர் நிலமும் நல்லது”

“If good people live in a land, the land itself becomes good;
the virtue of the people makes the country worthy.”

She gave importance to wisdom and education. She believes that virtue has the power to transform the country into a better place to live. This statement shifts attention from territory and power to human character. Avvaiyar constructed a human-centric definition of civilization, which gives importance to moral integrity on the concourse of political strength.

The Nellikani Episode: Wisdom over Power

One of the most celebrated episodes in Avvaiyar's poetry is the gifting of the *Nellikani*, a rare gooseberry believed to prolong life. This incident also comes under the seven grand charity called Kadaiyelu Vallalgal (The Last Seven Patrons/Philanthropists), who are renowned in ancient Tamil literature for their extraordinary generosity. According to the poems (Songs 91, 206, 235), Adhiyaman receives the fruit during a hunting expedition that offers immortality but he does not eat it, instead he offers it to Avvaiyar. He prioritized her longevity over his own, believing her service to Tamil literature and society was more vital,



showcasing his profound respect for art and knowledge. This gesture becomes a powerful symbol of wisdom surpassing power and Avvaiyar narrates this moment with emotional depth:

“சிறியிலை நெல்லித் தீங்கனி குறியாது

ஆதல் நின்னகத்து அடக்கிச்

சாதல் நீங்க எமக்கு ஈத்தனையே”

“You kept not the rare gooseberry for yourself,
but gave it to me,
so that my life may endure
and wisdom may not perish.”

This episode reflects emotional intelligence on both sides. The ruler recognizes the value of wisdom, while the poet acknowledges the ethics involved in this gesture and she understands the value of the gift given to her. Meanwhile, the patron had a big heart to sacrifice his gift and donate it for societal betterment and not to use it for himself. This act transforms their relationship into one of intellectual companionship rather than mere patronage.

The symbolic meaning of the *Nellikani* extends beyond personal friendship. It suggests that the survival of wisdom is more important than the survival of power. Avvaiyar thus constructs a philosophical hierarchy where knowledge, ethics and cultural memory outweigh political authority.

Friendship and Ethical Kingship

One of the central themes in Avvaiyar’s poems is her profound friendship with Adhiyaman Neduman Anji. Their relationship was not hierarchical but their bond reflects respect and gratitude for each other. She praises his generosity and wisdom but also emphasizes his ethical responsibilities as a ruler.

In several poems, Avvaiyar portrays Adhiyaman as a warrior who is powerful and balances strength with compassion. Her views about kingship was that true valor lies not in destruction but in protection. This idea aligns with Sangam ethical thought, where monarchy is defined by responsibility toward people. Her poems (Songs 87, 89, 90, and 94) describe Adhiyaman’s martial excellence and diplomatic intelligence. For instance, in *Purananuru* 89, Avvaiyar depicts him as a fearless warrior whose strength protects his people rather than merely destroying enemies. She emphasizes that his sword is not used for reckless aggression but for defending his land. Avvaiyar constructs an ideal model of leadership by presenting these dual qualities. Some verses of poem (87) representing the same are as follows.

“போர் செய்து புகழ் பெருகும் பொருநர் அல்லாய்

ஊர் காக்கும் அரண் போல நிற்கும் மன்னன்”

“You are not one who seeks fame only through war,
but stand like a fortress protecting your people.”



This verse shifts the meaning of courage from unnecessary aggression but to protection of the public. Here, the metaphor of the “fortress” suggests stability and security. The ruler’s strength is meaningful not in destruction but in safeguarding the community physically and socially. Avvaiyar thus evaluates kingship through ethical responsibility rather than battlefield glory. Her political philosophy is that leaders must be guided by moral judgment.

This ethical evaluation becomes clearer in her emphasis on responsibility over conquest. Kingship is not defined by military success alone but by wisdom and ethical responsibility. Her poetry thus becomes a space where political authority is evaluated within ethics rather than mere heroic achievement.

Emotional Intelligence in Avvaiyar’s Poetry

Avvaiyar’s poems demonstrate a remarkable understanding of emotional intelligence. Her verses reveal empathy, relational awareness and moral reflection. She not only praises the ruler but interprets his actions within emotional and ethical contexts. These verses mentioned below introduce the concept of violence within limits. Through her poem she advises the violence towards enemies has to be calculated and does not to be used as a platform to show aggression.

“வாள் எடுத்த போதும் அருள் குன்றாதான்
பகைவர்க்கும் அளவறிந்து நடக்கும் மன்னன்”

“Even when he raises the sword, his compassion does not diminish;
he acts with measure even toward enemies.”

Avvaiyar emphasizes measured violence. The king should not be uncontrolled in battle. The phrase knowing limits signals ethical restraint. Even in warfare, the ruler has to maintain compassion and empathy towards the enemy. A ruler should have emotional intelligence, control over impulse and moral awareness. Avvaiyar undoubtedly constructs a model of leadership where strength is moderated by wisdom not power.

Furthermore, her poems reflect sensitivity toward human relationships. She understands the emotional burden of leadership and portrays Adhiyaman as a ruler who balances strength with compassion. This portrayal also aligns with modern concepts of emotional intelligence, where empathy and moral judgment define leadership. She anticipates the long term stability of the society.

Political Ethics and Human-Centric Civilization

Avvaiyar’s contribution lies in her formulation of political ethics grounded in human values. Her famous assertion that good people make a good land shifts attention from geography to morality. This idea challenges conventional notions of power.

“உலகம் வாழ்வது அறிவுடையோரால்
அவரை நீ காத்தது பெருமை”



“The world endures through the wise;
your greatness lies in preserving them.”

This line connects with the Nellikani episode. The ruler’s duty is to protect wisdom. Avvaiyar evaluates Adhiyaman not by how many wars he has won but by his recognition of intellectuality. Her poems gave emphasis on generosity, justice and compassion. She praises Adhiyaman not only for his military strength but also for his kindness toward poets and people. This portrayal constructs an ethical model of kingship.

Her poetry suggests that civilization depends on moral character rather than amount of wins. By highlighting wisdom and virtue, Avvaiyar defines governance as ethical responsibility. This human-centric approach distinguishes her work within Sangam literature.

Lineage and Continuity of Virtue

Avvaiyar extends her praise beyond Adhiyaman Neduman Anji to the next generation, his son Poguttu Ezhini, thereby constructing a continuity of virtue within the ruling lineage. In *Purananuru* 96, she describes the young prince as embodying the same strength and nobility associated with his father. Her praise is again only physical but ethical, suggesting inherited courage and generosity from the parents and highlighting his upbringing. The poem highlights his martial readiness and noble bearing, presenting him worthy of his lineage. She describes him by his youthful vigor combined with warrior qualities:

“வெண்கோல் ஏந்தி விளங்கும் இளையோன்
அஞ்சாத நெஞ்சம் அடையுடையவன்”

“The young one who shines holding the bright spear,
possesses a fearless heart.”

The emphasis on fearlessness situates Poguttu Ezhini within the *puram* code of heroism. By highlighting his inherited courage, she implies that virtue is not accidental but cultivated within a moral lineage. The prince is portrayed not merely as a successor but as a continuation of ethical kingship.

This continuity is significant within *Puram* poetics, where lineage often guarantees stability of governance. By praising the son, she explains the endurance of values associated with Adhiyaman. Her focus on the young prince suggests hope for the preservation of rule because the future of the administration depends not only on present rulers but on the transmission of moral values across generations. The transition from father to son is therefore not merely genealogical but ethical.

Conclusion

The poems of Avvaiyar in *Purananuru* create an ethical vision of *Puram* life. In her vision, kingship is not only judged by warfare but by generosity, moral values and wisdom. The way she portrayed Adhiyaman Neduman Anji, where he efficiently balances valor in battle with moral responsibility is rare to find in the contemporary world. In poems 89 and 90, she highlights his strength on the battlefield while also emphasizing protection of the people, such a conception of heroism in contemporary context is uncommon, here power is often expressed through aggression and restrictions. It suggests the need for leadership grounded in justice, accountability and ethical restraint. She thinks that heroism is only significant when it is



connected to justice and social well-being. This ethical framework is later shown in The Nellikani episode, documenting Adhiyaman's choice to give the life-extending gooseberry to the poet. This incident defines virtue, Adhiyaman's decision to offer the gooseberry to the poet shows the preservation of wisdom over individual survival but in a modern world driven by material gain and individual success, this moment demands reorientation toward valuing knowledge as a collective good, emphasizing education, intellectual preservation, and the long-term benefits of wisdom for society. Thus, the episode becomes central to her new definition of Puram generosity, focusing on the importance of preserving knowledge over material gifts. Avvaiyar's political philosophy becomes clear in Purananuru 187, where she claims that the value of a land comes from the goodness of its people. By placing the worth of a country in its moral character instead of its land or power, she presents a human-centered idea of civilization. If we prioritise correct education in the country the land will automatically become a better place to live irrespective of their geographical condition. She challenges contemporary tendencies to measure progress only through economic growth or territorial strength and instead demands for a model of development centered on ethics, social welfare, and human dignity. This concern with sustaining moral order is extended in poem 96 through her praise of Poguttu Ezhini, where the continuity of virtue across generations is emphasized, highlighting the importance of transmitting ethical values over time. In the present context of growing generational disconnection and erosion of shared values, this insight draws attention to the need for cultural, educational, and social mechanisms that ensure the preservation of moral consciousness. Taken together, these poems transform Puram poetry into a reflection on ethical governance, where restraint, generosity, wisdom and emotional intelligence shape leadership, showing that the strength of a society lies not in conquest but in the moral integrity of its people, and highlighting the continued relevance of Avvaiyar's vision in addressing the moral and political challenges of the contemporary world.

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