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Love, Mobility, and Materiality: A Critical Study of Merchant Imagery in Akanānūru

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of salt merchant imagery in *Akanānūru* and its significance in shaping the concept of love within Sangam poetics. Moving beyond surface-level description, the study argues that merchant figures function as a structural device linking emotional experience (*akam*) with socio-economic realities (*puram*). Through close textual analysis, the paper demonstrates how themes of mobility, risk, trade, and survival inform representations of love, particularly in contexts of separation. The study highlights how economic life is not external to love but deeply embedded within its poetic expression.

Keywords: Sangam Literature, Akanānūru, Salt Merchants, Akam-Puram, Love, Trade, Mobility, Simile

Introduction

Sangam literature traditionally distinguishes between *akam* (interior, emotional life) and *puram* (exterior, public life). However, *Akanānūru*, while belonging to the *akam* corpus, frequently incorporates elements of the material world, especially trade and merchant life. Among these, salt merchants (*umaṇar*) emerge as recurring figures. This paper argues that such imagery is not incidental but central to understanding how love is conceptualized in relation to economic life, geography, and mobility.

Sounds capes of Danger and Desolation

*How can her anklet-wearing,
beautiful feet with short strides walk
in the fierce wasteland with no water,
where clear sounds, of salt merchants*



*with harsh goads scolding their bulls
echo in the lofty mountains, sounding
like the uproars of those who rise up
and move away from their town? (Akanānūru; 17)*

These verses illustrate how the harsh cries of merchants driving their bulls echo across the mountains, creating an intimidating soundscape. This imagery is used to question whether a delicate heroine can endure such a treacherous path. Ultimately, the merchant imagery intensifies the palpable fear and difficulty of the journey.

Refinement, Luxury, and Irresistible Desire

*The fine pollen of kōngam flowers
is like the gold in the coral boxes of gold merchants.
Even those who disrespect love are unable
to be separated in this desirable season. (Akanānūru; 25)*

This poem employs a refined aesthetic simile, comparing the pollen of *kōngam* flowers to gold stored in the coral boxes of wealthy traders. This comparison elevates natural beauty into the realm of luxury and wealth, demonstrating how merchant imagery can signify refinement, value, and desirability. It also subtly suggests that love, much like material wealth, is irresistible; even those who attempt to resist its pull cannot remain detached during such a fertile season.

Communal Labor and Shared Strength

*youngsters and elders on the beach,
pull the nets with uproar to the sandy shore,
gathering together like the strong bulls
of salt merchants that are yoked to wagons,
give generously like charitable farmers,
and fill the bowls of those in need with fish,
splitting the rest of their catch into sections,
calling out prices, and sleeping on the shore
with tall and firm sand dunes! (Akanānūru; 30)*

This poem portrays coastal life where fishermen of all ages work in unison to pull nets ashore, highlighting the importance of communal labor. By comparing their coordination and endurance to the strong bulls of salt merchants, the verse emphasizes collective strength. Furthermore, the fishermen do not merely sell their catch; they share it generously with the needy, reflecting the core moral values of Sangam society. Thus, the poem seamlessly blends livelihood, generosity, and community life within the coastal landscape.

Peril and Vulnerability in the Wilderness

*In the vast forest, merchants screamed
and ran away from the path, fearing the fire,
and a confused elephant herd that feared an
arrogant tiger ran together and joined them. (Akanānūru; 39)*

In this wild forest, sparks from a fire catching onto dry bamboo fall upon withered leaves below, igniting a rapid blaze. Carried by the wind, the flames spread fiercely across the dry grass. In this moment of sudden



peril, the land merchants (*sāttu*) traveling the route flee in a panic that mirrors a herd of elephants escaping a tiger. The scene vividly depicts a vast and dangerous forest landscape where natural forces create immediate jeopardy, overwhelming even experienced traders. This imagery underscores both the intensity of the wilderness and the inherent vulnerability of human transit within it.

Trade Risks and Emotional Separation (Pirivu)

*Strong shoulders carry tightly tied bows, eat fatty meat,
and chop the heads of strong merchants who
are warriors with perfect swords as they follow
their rows of donkeys carrying loads,
there is flesh stink in the battlefield. (Akanānūru; 89)*

These verses introduce a violent dimension to the landscape: highwaymen and warriors killing merchants traveling in caravans. This imagery reflects the extreme risks of ancient trade routes and the vulnerability of merchants despite their organized defenses. Trade is thus depicted as economically vital yet physically perilous. Many poems situate love within this harsh *pālai* (wasteland) landscape. In *Akanānūru 17*, the echoing cries of merchants create an intimidating atmosphere, while *Akanānūru 89* and *167* explicitly depict graphic violence against traders. These representations serve to intensify the emotional anguish of separation (*pirivu*). The heroine's deep anxiety for her traveling lover is projected onto the dangerous journeys undertaken by these merchants. Consequently, love is shaped by environmental and economic uncertainty; the physical dangers of the trade routes directly mirror the emotional instability of their bonds.

Merchant Mobility and Emotional Separation

Salt merchants are defined by their constant movement across landscapes. This mobility parallels the hero's departure from the heroine. In *Akanānūru 140*, the heroine is identified as the daughter of a salt merchant, embedding her identity within a trade-based social structure. In *Akanānūru 159*, the friend consoles the heroine by normalizing the lover's journey through comparison with merchant routes. Merchant mobility provides a socio-cultural framework that legitimizes and explains separation within love poetry.

*He does not consider that there is no people movement
in the wasteland, where warriors with strong bows cook
meat on the rock stoves abandoned by salt merchants, (Akanānūru; 119)*

In this poem the abandoned cooking places of salt merchants symbolize deserted landscapes. The absence of human movement highlights isolation and danger, reinforcing the hard nature of the wasteland.

*She is the loving daughter
of a salt merchant who goes through
mountains cracked by the sun's heat,
in his fast bullock cart, goading his oxen
with a stick, to sell his white grainy salt,
made in the salt pans without plowing,
near the seashore in a small settlement
of fishermen who hunt the huge ocean
for fish (Akanānūru;140)*



The heroine is identified as the daughter of a salt merchant. This situates her within a socio-economic identity tied to mobility, labor, and trade. The father's journey across harsh terrains reflects endurance, which indirectly shapes the emotional resilience expected of the heroine.

*My beloved beautiful friend! Do not
be distressed because your lover left on a path
where salt merchants who sell white,
grainy salt allow their oxen with strong
napes that are tied to their carts with
curved yokes to graze, rest and then
abandon their rock stoves (Akanānūru ;159)*

The friend consoles the heroine by describing the merchant route as one where traders allow their oxen to rest and graze. This softens the harshness of the journey and offers hope that the lover, like the merchants, will safely return.

Social Instability and Decay

*In the ruined common ground of a town abandoned by
its people who feared harsh men with curved bows and
fierce arrows, who kill merchants on the wasteland path
and eat with their loot, where peerkkai vines have spread (Akanānūru 167)*

This poem depicts extreme violence: bandits kill merchants and loot their goods. The abandoned town and overgrown vines symbolize decay and fear. Merchant imagery here becomes a marker of social instability.

Adaptability and Emotional Endurance

In *Akanānūru* 169 and 257, merchants are shown adapting to exceptionally harsh conditions by utilizing whatever sparse resources are available for survival. This physical resilience directly parallels the psychological endurance required in love, particularly during prolonged periods of separation (*pirivu*). Thus, the grueling reality of merchant life becomes a literary model for emotional endurance, suggesting that preserving a romantic bond across distances requires equal measures of resilience and adaptability.

*.when we go through many paths where
tree tops are parched, the land is ruined without
benefit by the sun's moving hot rays which have spread
heat in the wasteland, loud bandits take the leftover
flesh pieces, threading them on iron rods, of a large bull
elephant killed and abandoned by a tiger after it ate to
its full, and many salt merchants who sell salt grown with
water from the roaring ocean,
roast the leftover flesh in small fires started with kindling
wood, and eat it with rice cooked with sweet water from
springs.(Akanānūru 169)*

This verse provides a highly realistic, unromanticized depiction of survival: merchants cook and eat leftover meat scavenged in a hostile environment. This raw and practical scene shows that trade life is shaped entirely by necessity, serving as a powerful metaphor for the grit required to sustain love through desolation.



Ethnographic Realism and Collective Identity

The wasteland, where offering protection to travelers in scorching heat in the large forest with beautiful omai trees, going on opposite directions with their whistles, salt merchants carrying sticks and wearing bee-swarmed garlands strung with new pāthiri flowers with fuzzy tops mixed with flame-like flowers strung with thāzhai petals, and leather slippers that create sounds, are together like town gatherings, as they go on the difficult harsh wasteland paths pulling their wagons with spoked wheels, drawn by perfect bulls with no slack in their strong legs, as curved bells jingle, description of umanar (Akanānūru 191)

This poem offers a detailed ethnographic description of the salt merchants (*umanar*)—cataloging their attire, tools, wagons, livestock, and group signaling. The explicit comparison of the caravan to a "town gathering" highlights their collective identity. Here, merchants represent a structured, organized social system thriving within mobile spaces, offering a sense of order against the chaos of the wilderness.

Violence, Vulnerability, and the High Stakes of Separation

Despite their organization, several poems emphasize the extreme vulnerability of merchants to violent bandits. In *Akanānūru* 245 and 291, merchants are routinely attacked, forcing them to abandon vital trade routes. In the broader thematic framework of the *Akanānūru*, these graphic depictions amplify the emotional stakes of love by explicitly associating the hero's journey with physical danger, thereby validating the heroine's intense anxiety.

I'm not leaving the pretty, dark-hued young woman to go to the forest with long, forked paths and rocks,where rains have forgotten to fall,bamboo has dried out, and young,strong bandits who carry mighty bowskill merchants, and as night arrives,their leader goes to houses where liquoris sold by women with streaked armsresembling bamboo and pale spots ontheir stomachs, and unable to buy liquor,he rubs the parched head of his son playingin the town's common grounds and urgeshim to go and fetch the white tusks of forestelephants with musth, pointing to wherethey are kept, to barter for liquor, and spend the night in a village on the harsh battlefield, (Akanānūru 245)

The hero uses this dangerous *pālai* (wasteland) landscape to reject separation, declaring that he will not abandon his beloved to travel a route marked by drought, dried bamboo, and murderous bandits. The vivid depiction of the bandit leader—too poor to buy spirits, forcing his son to salvage elephant tusks in a violent



survival economy—contrasts sharply with the tenderness of love. By invoking the perilous world of merchants and bandits, the hero reinforces the immense value of emotional union over economic gain.

*In the mountain land where,
in the forked paths with robbers, twigs
are placed for those who travel to see the
path to take, on top of fork-leaved yā trees
whose fibrous trunk barks are peeled and
chewed by elephants for water, and the
fibrous dung that is left behind is used as
fuel by illiterate salt merchants, in the
desolate place where bear cubs dig into
termite mounds, hugged by small bushes
with tiny stems, at night, and seize white
snakes, causing them to roll in fear (Akanānūru 257)*

This poem portrays a harsh, unpredictable mountain landscape where travel is risky and survival depends entirely on resourcefulness. Just as elephants extract moisture from bark, the salt merchants adapt by using dried elephant dung as fuel. The surrounding dangers indicated by the guide twigs marking bandit territory and bear cubs hunting venomous snakes highlight the hostile terrain through which these resilient figures must navigate.

*Fierce marksmen wearing leaves on their
heads who shoot their rapid arrows that
sound like the buzzing of bees that eat
pollen from clusters of flowers, are loud
on the forked paths that are abandoned by
merchants whose precious goods they seize,
and on a path on that tall summit, does with
spots think about eating tasty, (Akanānūru 291)*

Here, merchants are forced to completely abandon their trade routes due to predatory bandits who seize their precious cargo. The fear of theft disrupts entire economic networks, highlighting how human systems depend on a safety and stability that are painfully absent in the *pālai* wilderness

Infrastructure, Community, and the Geography of Hope

Akanānūru 295 describes wells dug by merchants to support travelers and animals. These structures represent care, continuity, and shared human effort. Even within harsh landscapes, systems of support exist, symbolizing hope and the possibility of reunion in love.

*past the land with different language,
of Vadukars with tightly strung, strong
bows and arrows, loud, drunk with
delightful arrogance, passing the forest
that is difficult to pass in the mountain
belonging to Pulli wearing jingling
warrior anklets, where those who travel*



*on the path rest near wide wells dug in
the harsh land with stones by many salt
merchants to rest their bulls that are
distressed in the land without water,
where the deep springs have dried, trees
are burned by the sun's rays, bamboo is
ruined in vast areas, and a tall bull elephant
with fierce, large shoulders, that won a battle
with a tiger, places his trunk on his tusks
that are as white as the moon, and lives on
one side with his female in the rocky forest path (Akanānūru 295)*

When salt merchants (*umaṇar*) travel in groups, they painstakingly dig *kūval* (wells) by breaking through the hard, parched soil. These wells provide life-sustaining water for their exhausted cart-bulls, themselves, and future travelers. By linking this practical infrastructure to the territory of King Pulli, the poem connects trade routes with political governance, showing that even the harsh wilderness is touched by human care and civic order.

Trade as a Backery to Everyday Life

Finally, merchant caravans serve as vital links that connect isolated environments, blending the harsh realities of travel with the domestic peace of coastal and wasteland settlements.

*.There is our small fine village on the water's edge,
where roaring waves rise up and break, causing
a hen that hatched that came with a caravan
of salt merchants to cluck and move away.(Akanānūru 310)*

This verse describes a coastal village where the thunderous sound of crashing waves startles a hen brought over by a traveling merchant caravan. This small, domestic detail beautifully illustrates the intersection of trade and everyday life. Merchant caravans do not merely transport inanimate goods; they introduce living elements into new environments, bridging the gap between mobile trade and stationary coastal life.

*rest a little in a lovely, small village in
the wasteland with conical huts where the
bells on the wagons of the salt merchants
jingle during the day,(Akanānūru 329)*

This verse depicts a small, pleasant village located within a harsh wasteland, offering a moment of rest for travelers. The conical huts suggest a simple, rustic settlement, while the jingling bells of the salt merchants' wagons during the day indicate continuous movement and trade. The contrast between the severe landscape and the peaceful resting place highlights the importance of such villages as relief points, where merchant activity brings life, sound, and connection even to remote areas.

*to the vast wasteland, where salt merchants
ride their wooden wagons,
the dull rims of the wheels cracking (Akanānūru 343)*

The acoustic imagery of worn-out wheel rims cracking against the hard ground emphasizes the physical strain of long journeys. It underscores the immense hardship required for survival, showing how merchants navigate unforgiving terrains as a fundamental part of their livelihood..



Stating the price of salt grown in saline land, going to faraway places with dusty paths, the lives of salt merchants with thick goads must be good when they go on the long paths in groups. (Akanānūru 390)

Despite the dusty paths and the necessity of carrying thick goads to control their livestock, this verse concludes with an acknowledgment of the merchants' prosperity and resilience. Their tightly knit, collective movement ensures safety and economic success, reinforcing the ultimate Sangam ideal that solidarity and determination can conquer the harshest landscapes

Conclusion;

The selected poems from *Akanānūru* reveal that merchant imagery, particularly that of salt traders (*umaṇar*), plays a crucial role in shaping the emotional, ecological, and socio-economic landscape of Sangam poetry. Far from being mere background figures, merchants function as dynamic symbols through which themes of love, separation, hardship, and survival are articulated. The recurring depiction of salt merchants traveling in caravans across arid wastelands emphasizes the hard realities of mobility, where dusty paths, broken wagon wheels, and the constant threat of bandits or natural calamities create an atmosphere of danger and uncertainty. These external landscapes mirror the inner emotional states of the lovers, especially in *pālai thinai*, where separation is intensified through harsh environmental imagery. At the same time, the poems integrate sounds such as the jingling of wagon bells and the shouting of traders—into the poetic imagination, blending economic activity with sensory experience. Merchant life is also portrayed as communal (“kaṇa-nirai vāzhkkai”), suggesting interdependence and collective endurance, yet it raises subtle questions about whether such a life is desirable. Importantly, the presence of women traders, particularly in *Akanānūru 390*, expands the scope of gender roles, showing women as active participants in economic exchange while also serving as central figures in romantic narratives. The blending of barter language with erotic expression demonstrates how commerce becomes a metaphorical framework for desire. Furthermore, the poems do not romanticize trade; they expose its vulnerabilities—merchants are depicted as victims of violence, forced abandonment, and ecological threats, highlighting the precariousness of livelihood. Thus, *Akanānūru* transforms merchant imagery into a powerful literary device that connects economy, ecology, and emotion, offering a nuanced portrayal of early Tamil society where love and livelihood are deeply intertwined.

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