

From Kurinji to Kyoto: A Structuralist Exploration of Binary Consciousness in Sangam Tamil Literature and Japanese Anime

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Abstract: *This article undertakes a comparative exploration of Sangam Tamil literature and Japanese anime through the structuralist framework of Claude Levi-Strauss, emphasizing binary oppositions as fundamental cognitive and cultural codes. Both traditions, though separated by vast historical, linguistic, and technological contexts, articulate human consciousness through structured oppositions *akam/puram*, *self/other*, *tool/companion*. Drawing from thinkers such as Susan Bassnett, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Susan J. Napier, this study positions comparative literature as a dynamic bridge between oral poetics and visual media. Through detailed readings of Sangam verses and anime narratives such as *Beyblade* and *Pokemon*, the paper reveals how both traditions internalize universal binaries to map the evolution of identity from childhood to adulthood. Ultimately, it argues that literature and animation function as parallel mythopoetic systems, translating collective emotion and ethics into symbolic form.*

Keywords: Anime, Cultural Consciousness, Structuralism, Binary Oppositions

I. INTRODUCTION

Comparative literature, as Susan Bassnett defines, “is not about comparing things that are the same; it’s about studying things that are different, to explore what that difference tells us” (2). This methodological inclusivity enables the study of unlikely pairings such as Sangam Tamil poetry and Japanese anime revealing structural affinities that transcend time and medium. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us that “the task of the comparatist is not merely to bridge cultures but to challenge the very idea of fixed meaning across borders” (12). In that spirit, this project places the *akam* and *puram* poetics of Sangam literature in dialogue with the dualistic aesthetics of anime. It draws on Itamar Even-Zohar’s concept of the “polysystem,” a flexible network through which diverse symbolic structures interact to shape cultural meaning (40).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Sangam corpus (circa 300 BCE–300 CE) reflects a world organized through the binaries of *akam* (interior, emotional) and *puram* (exterior, public). A. K. Ramanujan observes that “Tamil love poetry... is perhaps the only poetry in which the landscape is not merely the background for human events but is an integral part of the emotional experience” (26). Each landscape *kurinji* for union, *marutham* for domesticity, *palai* for separation—operates as a symbolic map of human feeling. Kamil Zvelebil emphasizes that these categories “are so deeply embedded in Tamil culture that they inform even the non-literary practices of the society” (45). The *akam/puram* division thus forms a semiotic grammar of consciousness, a structure through which interior emotion and exterior action are continually interwoven.

Susan J. Napier contends that “anime’s narrative and aesthetic power lies in its ability to stage psychological and societal conflict through powerful juxtapositions technology and tradition, spirituality and violence, isolation and community” (8). These oppositional patterns mirror the Sangam poets’ symbolic binaries, functioning as visual corollaries of human struggle. For Tzvetan Todorov, “the function of literature is not to reflect the real but to signify it” (83). Anime, like ancient Tamil poetry, does not imitate life but codifies experience through aesthetic form. Its



landscapes neon cities, sacred forests, shadowed corridors become the modern equivalents of Sangam's elemental topographies, projecting the psyche into the world of images.

Childhood forms the earliest field where moral and cognitive binaries take shape. Claude Levi-Strauss argued that the human mind structures the world through oppositional pairs light/dark, loyalty/betrayal, self/other. Narratives encountered during this stage shape ethical imagination. Jack Zipes notes that "fairy tales and early narratives are instrumental in helping children make sense of moral contradictions in the world" (37). In Sangam culture, oral poems taught values through symbolic narrative; in modern Japan, anime fulfills the same role through visual allegory. Series like Beyblade and Pokemon encode lessons of courage, empathy, and interdependence within fantastical conflicts. The Puram war verses and anime tournaments alike dramatize ethical growth through structured opposition.

In Beyblade: Metal Fusion, Gingka Hagane's journey evolves from solitary ambition to communal harmony. His statement "Through battles you form bonds with your friends!" (Season 1, Episode 15) transforms victory into empathy. Structuralism reads this as a mediation between the binaries of self and other, where meaning emerges only in relation. This vision resonates with *Purananuru* 192, where *Kaniyan Pungundranar* declares, "யாதும் ஊரே; யாவரும் கேளிர்" (All places are our homeland; all people are our kin). Both Gingka and Kaniyan reframe ambition as service, selfhood as belonging. The binary does not divide it resolves into harmony.

The binary of tool versus companion exposes a society's moral structure. In the opening episode of Pokemon, Ash Ketchum proclaims, "Pikachu is my friend, not a tool for battle!" (Season 1, Episode 1). His defiance transforms a utilitarian paradigm into an ethic of care, privileging relationality over power. A parallel insight appears in *Purananuru* 87, where *Avvaiyar* portrays a warrior not as an expendable instrument but as a sacred partner in the community's survival. Her metaphor of the "perfect chariot wheel," crafted with time and devotion, signifies uniqueness and irreplaceability. Both texts elevate companionship above function. Roland Barthes reminds us that "myth transforms history into nature" (13). These repeated tropes Ash's compassion, *Avvaiyar*'s reverence naturalize moral truth through narrative. Strength becomes synonymous with empathy, and the mythic binary resolves into ethical synthesis.

For Levi-Strauss, myths exist to reconcile contradictions. Childhood stories, whether oral or animated, perform this function within culture. Through repeated oppositions duty and desire, tool and companion they train the human mind to discern meaning through relation. Thus, childhood is not a suspension of structure but its inception. Both the Tamil bard and the Japanese animator are architects of moral imagination, shaping consciousness through poetic and visual design. Across centuries, their narratives reveal that the pursuit of order within chaos is a universal human endeavor.

III. CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis demonstrates that Sangam Tamil literature and Japanese anime, though separated by language, form, and era, share an identical structural DNA. Each uses binary oppositions as the scaffolding of meaning, translating inner life into symbolic form. Structuralism thus becomes the bridge that reveals how humanity narrates itself through contrast and reconciliation. From the *kurinji* hills of ancient *Tamilakam* to the neon skylines of Kyoto, both traditions illuminate the universal rhythm of consciousness: a perpetual dialogue between self and other, emotion and reason, past and future. Through these opposites, culture writes its most enduring truths.

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