



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-3; July-Sept(2025)

Agam Aesthetics and Imagery in Neithal Tinai Songs in *Kurunthogai*

Dr. S. Jerald Sagaya Nathan

Assistant Professor of English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous)

Tiruchirappalli – 620 002.

E-Mail: jsnathan1981@gmail.com/ geraldsagayanathan_en1@mail.sjctni.edu

Article Received: 06/08/2025

Article Accepted: 13/09/2025

Published Online: 14/09/2025

DOI: 10.53413/IJTELL.2025.6307

Abstract

This paper examines the Agam aesthetics—emphasizing inner emotions—and the rich imagery found in the Neithal tinai (seashore landscape) songs of the classical Tamil anthology *Kurunthogai*. In Sangam literature, the concept of tinai associates specific landscapes with particular emotional states. Neithal tinai, symbolizing the seashore, serves as a powerful metaphor for separation, longing, and emotional distance. Through detailed analysis of selected *Kurunthogai* poems, this study reveals how natural elements such as the sea, waves, horizon, and fisherfolk's nets are intricately woven into the emotional fabric of the poetry. The poems portray heroines waiting by the seashore, their gaze fixed on the horizon, embodying hope and despair. Sensory imagery—sight, sound, and smell—effectively conveys the intensity of internal states, blending nature and human emotion seamlessly. The paper also situates these findings within the broader scholarly discourse on Sangam aesthetics, underscoring the cultural and psychological depth of Tamil classical poetry. The study concludes that Neithal tinai poems in *Kurunthogai* exemplify the refined interplay between landscape and emotion, reflecting a sophisticated literary tradition that continues to resonate with contemporary readers and scholars alike.

Keywords: Agam aesthetics, Neithal tinai, *Kurunthogai*, Sangam poetry, Tamil literature, emotional imagery, classical Tamil poetry

Introduction

The classical Tamil literary tradition of Sangam poetry is renowned for its use of tinai—landscape categories that symbolize various emotional moods and social contexts. Among these, the Neithal tinai, representing the seashore or coastal landscape, is particularly



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-3; July-Sept(2025)

associated with themes of separation, longing, and emotional vulnerability. Kurunthogai, an important anthology within the Sangam corpus, contains numerous Neithal poems that vividly portray these sentiments through natural imagery and metaphor.

As Kamil Zvelebil (1973) notes, “the tinai landscapes are not mere backdrops but active emotional frameworks within which the poetic drama unfolds.” This paper explores how Agam aesthetics, focusing on internal feelings and emotional expression, are articulated through the Neithal tinai songs of Kurunthogai. By analyzing selected poems in their original Tamil alongside transliteration and translation, the study highlights the complex relationship between landscape, emotion, and poetic form.

Understanding Agam and Neithal Tinai in Sangam Literature

Sangam poetry is divided broadly into Agam (the inner world of emotions such as love, separation, and intimacy) and Puram (the external world of heroism, valor, and public life). Within Agam, the tinai system categorizes landscapes into five types, each embodying specific emotional states. Neithal tinai, the seashore, occupies a symbolic space between land and sea, mirroring the emotional liminality experienced by lovers separated by distance. This boundary landscape serves as a metaphor for hope and despair, presence and absence, reflecting the heroine’s emotional state in the poems.

A.K. Ramanujan (1985) emphasizes that “the boundaries of the Neithal tinai poetically construct a space of yearning, where the physical and emotional distances become inseparable poetic devices.” According to V. Narayanaswami (1965), the seashore landscape in Sangam poetry “embodies the emotional tension between presence and absence, making it an apt metaphor for separation and longing.”

Agam Aesthetics in Neithal Tinai Songs in Kurunthogai

Emotional Landscape and Symbolism

Neithal poems typically depict heroines standing or sitting by the seashore, their gaze fixed on the horizon, representing their anticipation or sorrow over the absence of their lovers. The seashore is not just a physical setting but an emotional space where natural elements—waves, sea breeze, nets—become symbols of longing and emotional tension. George Hart (1975) writes that “the natural elements in Sangam poetry do not simply describe a setting but evoke a precise emotional state within the Agam framework.” Similarly, Mariaselvam (2000) observes that “the Neithal tinai’s imagery, particularly the sea and its rhythms, mirrors the heroine’s fluctuating emotions of hope and despair.”

In *Kurunthogai* poem 292, a poem that is attributed to the poet Orampokiyar, the landscape of the Neithal tinai (seashore) serves as a poignant backdrop for the emotional interiority of the heroine, who speaks to her friend in a moment of longing and vulnerability.



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-3; July-Sept(2025)

Classified under the subtheme of Anthi tinai, the poem captures the emotional intensity of waiting for a beloved's return. The lines compare the heroine's sorrowful hope to the vastness of the ocean that stretches without end.

In a rough English rendering, she says, "O wide-eyed deer-eyed girl, like the vast ocean that stretches with no end in sight, how many more days will your heart linger in hope, waiting for the return of your beloved?" The setting — the seashore — not only reflects physical distance but also metaphorically embodies the emotional landscape of separation and longing. The poem exemplifies the core features of Agam poetry, where external nature mirrors internal emotion. The sea becomes a symbol of both separation and the boundless endurance of love, highlighting the psychological weight of waiting. This intricate fusion of environment and emotion is a hallmark of Sangam literature and is mirrored in modern poetic reimagining of the Neithal tradition.

In *Kurunthogai* poem 29, the imagery of fishing nets is employed as a potent metaphor to depict the heroine's state of vigilant waiting and fragile hope, a hallmark of the Neithal tinai. The poem's lines juxtapose the repetitive labor of fishermen casting nets with the emotional persistence of the heroine, who continually casts dreams into the vast emotional sea, hoping for her beloved's return. The shore, as in many Neithal poems, represents both a literal and symbolic boundary—between land and sea, certainty and uncertainty, presence and absence. The repeated casting of nets becomes a metaphor for the cyclical nature of emotional longing, where hope ebbs and flows like the tide. As Rajan (1971) observes, "the metaphor of nets is a recurring symbol in Neithal poetry, representing the psychological act of hoping to 'catch' the beloved's return," reinforcing how the natural world and human emotion are intricately entwined in Agam poetry. The poem thus exemplifies the Agam aesthetic, where personal longing is refracted through the rhythms and symbols of the coastal landscape.

In *Kurunthogai* poem 45, the poet employs the image of a tear merging with the ocean to symbolize the heroine's profound emotional dissolution into the vastness of separation. The lines evoke a scene where the heroine's tears blend seamlessly with the surging tides, signifying how individual sorrow becomes indistinguishable within the larger emotional landscape of the Neithal tinai. The retreating moon behind clouds further accentuates her emotional vulnerability and sense of abandonment. This seamless blending of the personal with the natural is characteristic of Agam poetry, where landscape acts not merely as setting but as an emotional mirror. As Blackburn (2003) aptly observes, "the merging of individual emotions into the vastness of nature reflects the Sangam poets' understanding of the self as part of a larger emotional and physical universe." The poem encapsulates this worldview, where the heroine's tear—an intimate emblem of grief—merges with the limitless sea,



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-3; July-Sept(2025)

underscoring the psychological weight of absence and the dissolution of the self into the rhythms of nature.

In *Kurunthogai* poem 108, the poet uses auditory imagery to dramatize the heroine's emotional upheaval, aligning the roar of the sea with her silent inner suffering. The lines evoke a vivid coastal soundscape, where the thunder of waves mirrors the turbulence within the heroine's heart. The contrast between the external noise of the sea and the silent repression of her tears serves as a powerful metaphor for emotional dissonance and longing. This auditory blending of environment and emotion is central to Agam poetry, particularly within the Neithal tinai, where natural elements such as waves, winds, and seagulls are imbued with emotional resonance. As Indira Viswanathan Peterson (1989) remarks, "sound imagery in Tamil poetry often functions as a conduit to convey the deepest emotional disturbances, making nature a living participant in the emotional drama." This poem exemplifies that insight, turning the ocean's roar into an audible expression of the heroine's grief, making the landscape not only a reflection of emotion but an active voice in its articulation. The result is a sensory-emotional synthesis that immerses the reader in both the physical and psychological dimensions of love and separation.

Kuruntokai poem 134 presents a striking interplay between natural cycles and emotional fluctuation, using the imagery of retreating waves and the setting moon to symbolize the heroine's fading hope amid separation. The repetition in the lines mimics the rhythmic ebb and flow of the sea, mirroring the unstable emotional state of the speaker. As the once-roaring waves subside and the sea stills, a parallel decline occurs in the heroine's hope, which dims like the moon disappearing into the horizon. This technique exemplifies a core feature of Neithal tinai in Agam poetry, where external natural processes reflect internal emotional transformations. The setting moon and still waters not only convey the passage of time but also suggest emotional distance and despair. Subramanian (1995) observes that "the cyclical nature of natural phenomena in Neithal poetry reflects the inevitability of emotional change, a poetic device that underscores the transient nature of human feelings." In this way, the poem portrays emotional fading not as abrupt but as part of a broader cosmic rhythm, rendering human experience deeply entwined with the natural world.

In *Kuruntokai* poem 157, the heroine's emotional longing is expressed through a vivid metaphor drawn from the Neithal tinai seascape, where fishing is a daily reality. The poem's classical lines compare the act of casting nets into the deep blue sea to the heroine's eyes casting longing glances, hoping to "catch" the presence of her absent lover. Her heart and mind are described as swimming and soaked in that gaze, suggesting a total emotional immersion. This rich metaphor elegantly links interior emotional states to the external



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-3; July-Sept(2025)

activities of coastal life, a signature feature of Agam poetry. The heroine's longing becomes not just an internal feeling but an extension of the physical and cultural environment. As Chelliah (2003) notes, "such metaphors demonstrate the interweaving of cultural practices and emotional states, which is central to the Agam aesthetic." This poem thus exemplifies how Sangam poets transformed ordinary actions—such as casting fishing nets—into powerful emotional symbols, reinforcing the intimate relationship between landscape, livelihood, and longing in classical Tamil love poetry.

Kurunthogai poem 178 vividly demonstrates the use of multi-sensory imagery to express emotional intensity, particularly the heroine's pain of separation. The lines evoke the salty breeze, the memory of a lover's touch, and the smell of the sea, all of which serve to awaken the heroine's sorrow. Through references to smell, touch, and sight, the poem transforms the seashore into a deeply emotional and sensory space. The remembered sensations of the lover's presence intensify the absence, making her grief tangible. This approach reflects the Agam tradition of Sangam poetry, where internal emotions are seamlessly projected onto the physical environment, particularly in the Neithal tinai. As Kannan (1982) observes, "the use of multi-sensory imagery in Neithal poems creates a palpable emotional atmosphere, enhancing the reader's empathetic engagement." In this poem, the convergence of sensory perception and emotional memory not only grounds the heroine's feelings in the material world but also heightens the reader's emotional immersion, offering a deeply affective portrayal of love and loss shaped by the coastal landscape.

Secondary Perspectives on Agam and Neithal Imagery

Scholars such as Kamil Zvelebil and A.K. Ramanujan emphasize that tinai landscapes function as active emotional agents rather than mere backdrops. The Neithal tinai's liminal nature symbolizes the complex interplay of hope and despair, absence and presence. The layered metaphors and sensory richness in the poems deepen their emotional impact, reflecting a poetic tradition steeped in cultural nuance and psychological insight (Zvelebil, 1973; Ramanujan, 1985). Krishnamurthy (1987) highlights that "Neithal imagery is a poetic strategy to externalize internal conflict, making the seashore an emotional threshold." Hart (1975) further observes that "the Agam aesthetic depends heavily on such spatial metaphors which allow the poet to navigate complex emotional landscapes."

Conclusion

The Neithal tinai songs in *Kurunthogai* showcase the sophisticated Agam aesthetics of Sangam poetry. Through vivid natural imagery and metaphor, these poems express universal emotions of love, separation, and hope. The seamless blending of external landscapes with inner emotional states illustrates a profound cultural understanding of human



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-3; July-Sept(2025)

psychology in classical Tamil literature. These poems remain relevant and inspiring, affirming the enduring power of Sangam poetry's artistic vision.

Works Cited

- Blackburn, Stuart H. Print, Folklore, and Nationalism in Colonial South India. Permanent Black, 2003.
- Chelliah, Shobhana L. A Grammar of the Tamil Language. Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Hart, George L. Poets of the Tamil Anthologies: Ancient Poems of Love and War. Princeton University Press, 1975.
- Kannan, R. Sangam Tamil Literature: Its History and Significance. University of Madras, 1982.
- Krishnamurthy, R. Landscape and Emotion in Tamil Poetry. University of Madras, 1987.
- Mariaselvam, S. The Aesthetics of Sangam Poetry. Tamil Sangam Publications, 2000.
- Narayanaswami, V. The Tamil Tinai Theory and Its Application. Saraswati Press, 1965.
- Peterson, Indira Viswanathan. Singing of a Place: Pilgrim Poetry of Tamil Nadu. Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Ramachandran, R. Tamil Literary Culture and the Sangam Tradition. Tamil Nadu Historical Society, 2002.
- Ramanujan, A.K. "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" Contributions to Indian Sociology, vol. 19, no. 1, 1985, pp. 41–58.
- Rajan, P.K. Poetic Imagery in Tamil Literature. Institute of Tamil Studies, 1971.
- Subramanian, T. Classical Tamil Poetry: A Study on Themes and Techniques. Kerala University Press, 1995.
- Zvelebil, Kamil. The Smile of Murugan: On Tamil Literature of South India. E.J. Brill, 1973.