



## The concept of Interiority (Akam) in bhakti literature

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### Abstract

A profound structural shift marks the evolution of South Indian devotional expression: the adaptation of Classical Sangam poetic conventions into the spiritual landscape of the Bhakti movement. This paper examines the transformation of Akam (interior/love) poetics—originally intended to convey the nuances of human clandestine and marital love—into a theological framework for divine communion. In ancient Tamil literature, Akam defined the "inner world," focusing on the psychological states of lovers categorized by five distinct landscapes (Thinai). Bhakti poets, specifically the Alvars and Nayanmars, repurposed these secular motifs to articulate the soul's yearning for the Divine. This transition represents a "sacralization of the erotic," where the human protagonist is replaced by the devotee, and the hero by the Deity.

**Keywords:** Akam, bhakti, interiority, thinai

### Introduction

The initial phase of Tamil literature follows the methodology of Tholkappiyam, which classifies poetic subjects into two major categories: Akam (interior/love) and Puram (exterior/objective). This classification forms the fundamental basis of Sangam literature. Even within these, Akam poems were superior in number. As time progressed, ethical literature, epics, and Bhakti (devotional) literature emerged and flourished. Even these epics and devotional works were influenced by the preceding Akam tradition, incorporating its elements into their structure at various levels. This article explores the manifestation of Akam concepts within Bhakti literature with the help of the Divya Prabandham hymns.

Utilizing the tradition of romantic love—visualizing the relationship between the Soul and the Divine as that between a heroine and a hero—is not a tradition exclusive to Tamil. This tradition exists in Western Latin and English poems as well. Literary history texts mention that this pattern is also found in Bengali and Kannada songs within our own country. Therefore, in Bhakti literature, this is a universal stylistic technique.

However, when observing Tamil Bhakti literature, the Pulaneri Vazhakkam (poetic convention) based on Nadaga Vazhakkam (dramatic usage) and Ulagiyal Vazhakkam (worldly usage) as presented in Tholkappiyam and Sangam literature is not accepted as it is. We observe certain traditional shifts, transgressions of norms, and specific thematic selections (Thurai) made to suit the glorification of the Divine. These indicate that Bhakti literature possesses certain unique interior concepts (Akam theories). This section attempts to identify these features.

### Transgression of Traditions

Tholkappiyam and Sangam literature point out certain traditions regarding Akam events, characters, and speech. These are transgressed in Bhakti literature.

The rule laid down by Tholkappiyam is that women should not engage in Madaleruthal (a desperate act of riding a palmyra horse to proclaim love). Even the mention of a woman engaging in Madal is not found in Sangam literature. However, in the Nalayira Divya Prabandham,

works like Periya Thirumadal and Siriya Thirumadal present situations where the heroine declares, "I shall engage in Madal." Thirumangai Alvar, who sings this tradition in Periya Thirumadal, states:

**(Verse Summary):** "I have heard the saying in the Southern tongue (Tamil tradition) that graceful women do not ride the Madal over men despite public scandal; I do not accept that clearly, and I have chosen the enduring Northern tradition (Vada Neri)."

Thus, it can be said that he committed this transgression of tradition consciously.

Tholkappiyam states that even when the heroine suffers, she does not go to the hero's land (Tol. 1146), though such a thought may occur while communing with her heart (Tol. 1147). Sangam literature provides scenes in a few poems (e.g., Kuruntokai 11) where the heroine desires in her heart to go to the hero's land.

However, Bhakti literature creates heroines who express their intent to others that they will go to the hero's land and heroines who plead with their mothers and friends to take them to the hero's town (Periya Thirumozhi 9:5).

**(Verse Summary - Thiruvaimozhi 7:3:1):** "See how the lotus-eyed Lord, bearing the white conch and the discus, drives his bird-mount (Garuda) through my heart! O mothers, what can I say? I shall surely reach the town of Thirupperai."

### Varaivu Kadathal (Urging for Marriage)

In Sangam literature, the role of urging the hero to marry the heroine or pleading on her behalf belongs solely to the friend (Thozhi). There is no place for the mother at this stage of the Kalavu (secret love) conduct. However, Bhakti literature alters this tradition as well. Here, the mother stands before the Lord, pleading on behalf of her daughter (the heroine).

**(Verse Summary—Periya Thirumozhi 2:7:4):** "She says a single hour is longer than an eon; she says the bright sun has gone to sleep. The ocean laments, and the birds on the palm trees do not sleep; she says the southern breeze is crueler than fire. O Lord of Idaventhai, what have You intended for my golden girl?"

In Sangam literature, the heroine's act of pining and lamenting aloud about the hero, or her state of crying out to others due to excessive passion (Kama) caused by the pain of separation, is categorized under Perunthinai (unsuited or excessive passion). These have no place in the Anpin Ainthinai (the five virtuous tracts of love). Furthermore, there is no place in the Akam tradition for a scene where the heroine directly expresses her intense passion to the hero himself.

However, in Bhakti literature, we find instances where the mother or the friend describes the pining state of the heroine, as well as scenes where the heroine directly conveys her sorrow to the hero (the Divine). (Periya Thirumozhi 4:8, Thiruvaimozhi 4:2, 4:4).

There are specific reasons why such transgressions and the upcoming traditional shifts are employed in Bhakti literature. Human love is considered worthy of praise and distinction only as long as it remains within certain boundaries. When it exceeds those limits, it becomes an object of ridicule; hence, it is bound by certain rules.

However, Divine Love is beyond such regulations. While "self-forgetting" or "limitless" passion might be marginalized in human contexts, when directed toward the Divine, it symbolizes the state of union with God and the complete dissolution of the ego (Anava). Therefore, these elements are accepted in this context.

### Transformation of Traditions

This refers to the process where traditions assigned to a specific character by Tholkappiyam and Sangam literature are transferred to a different character in Bhakti literature. The Nalayira Divya Prabandham takes certain elements of the secret love phase (Kalavu)—such as the first sight (Katchi), doubt (Aiyam), clarity (Thelivu), natural union (Iyarkaipunarchi), and meeting through a friend (Paangarkootam)—which were traditionally attributed to the hero, and assigns them to the heroine.

**Aiyam (Doubt/Uncertainty)** The concept that "Doubt" belongs only to the hero is derived from the Tholkappiyam sutra: "Aiyakkilavi Aaduvirkuritthe" (The speech of doubt belongs to the male). Sangam literature also creates scenes where only the hero experiences such doubt (upon seeing the heroine). However, in later periods, with the intent of glorifying the king or the Divine, Muthollayiram and Bhakti literature shifted this distinction to the king and the Lord. (Periya Thirumozhi 9:2).

**(Verse Summary - Periya Thirumozhi 2:8:2):** "When I wondered in doubt, 'Who is this person with the form of a lion (Hari)?' He replied, 'I am the one from Attabuyakaram.'"

Furthermore, in earlier literature (Sangam), we see scenes where the hero meets the heroine and tries to approach her by asking, "Which is your town?" Later, during the stage of Kurai-nayappu (seeking a favor/soliciting love), the friend (Thozhi) informs the hero about their town. In Bhakti literature, this structure is transformed into a scene where the heroine asks about the town, and the Lord points to His abode and moves on.

**(Verse Summary - Thirunedunthandagam 22):** "When I asked, 'Where is my Lord's temple?' He Himself replied, 'Is this not the beautiful Thiruvaili?'"

In the theme of Paangarkootam (meeting through a male friend), the Akam tradition dictates that the hero describes the heroine's nature and the place he met her to his friend. The Prabandham, however, constructs this with the heroine praising the hero's qualities and speaking to her female friends about the town where he dwells. (Thiruvaimozhi 7:7; Periya Thirumozhi 9:3)

In Sangam tradition, the friend reproaches the hero (Kazharal), and the hero defends his love (Kazhatrethir Maruthal). The Prabandham depicts the heroine in this state of defending her love against reproach (Thiruvaimozhi 5:5).

In the Kalavu (secret love) of Sangam literature, the hero stands as the supplicant before the heroine, thus giving her more significance. However, here, it is the heroine who stands as the supplicant before the Divine. To enhance the glory of the Divine, it becomes necessary to adopt a 'tradition shift,' where techniques originally attributed to the hero are reassigned to the heroine.

### Selection of Themes (Thurai)

A widespread feature of Bhakti literature is praising the Lord by singing about the specific sacred sites (Thalam) where He resides. Therefore, among Akam poetic techniques, those themes that provide an opportunity to mention a location are selectively preferred.

Among the themes thus selected, Udanpokku (elopement/going away with the hero) holds the primary place. Here, the foster mother (Sevili) wonders whether the heroine and the hero have reached the hero's town.

Next, the following states of the heroine, unable to bear the separation from the hero, are depicted:

The heroine declares that she herself will go to the hero's town.

Requesting her friends and mothers to take her there.

The mother wonders with concern whether the heroine, who left in such a manner, has safely reached the hero's town. (Ref: Para 1.2, Thiruvaimozhi 6:7, Periya Thirumozhi 3:7)

The themes (Thurai) mentioned earlier in sections 2.2 and 2.3 also facilitate this practice of praising the sacred abodes (Thalam-paduthal).

Furthermore, the heroine lamenting aloud about the hero's glory provides an opportunity to praise his various divine deeds. Therefore, themes such as the heroine's lament, addressing non-human objects (Athrinal—like birds or clouds) as messengers, and the mother or friend describing the heroine's distress are adopted to serve this purpose. (Thiruvaimozhi 4:8, 4:4, 5:6; Periya Thirumozhi 8:3)

To glorify the physical splendor of the Lord, themes that appreciate his excellence, describe his nature, and state how his beauty caused distress (love-sickness) to the heroine are integrated. (Thiruvaimozhi 7:7, 6:6; Periya Thirumozhi 9:2, 8:1)

### Conclusion

Thus, in the context of praising the Divine, we observe three fundamental aspects in the interior concepts (Akam theory) of Bhakti literature:

**Transgression of Traditions:** Breaking established rules (e.g., women engaging in Madaleruthal).

**Transformation of Traditions:** Reassigning roles (e.g., attributing the hero's active seeking to the heroine).

**Selection of Themes:** Choosing specific poetic situations that allow for the glorification of sacred places and divine attributes.

**References**

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