



Volume 2, Issue 1, 2025

Intuitions & Insights

An Interdisciplinary Research Journal

ISSN: 3048-6793



A short study of the feminine voices in *Akam* poems and *Gāthā Saptasatī*

Padmavati Gangopadhyay

Department of English, Kotshila Mahavidyalaya, Purulia, West Bengal, India

Email: gangulyria23@yahoo.com

Abstract: Ancient Indian love poetry is remarkable in its beautiful delineation of the women's' experiences in love and that too in voices of their own. *Akam* poems of classical Tamil antiquity and ancient Prakrit collection of poetry *Gāthā Saptasatī* are not an exception in this regard as many of these poems give articulations to the varied phases of love as seen through the eyes of women. In our present study we will look at these articulations of *Akam* poems and *Gāthā Saptasatī* in a comparative framework to effectively understand the enriching experience offered to the readers of these poetry-collections.

Keywords: Character-types, Dialogue, Landscape, Language, Love, Monologue, Suggestiveness, *Tiṇais*, Voices, Women

*Corresponding author: : Padmavati Gangopadhyay

Received: 25.11.2024; Accepted: 07.02.2025; Published: 10.02.2025

1. Introduction

In many genres of literature across the centuries, women's voices have occupied secondary position in relation to that of men. This in turn puts into focus the subordinate position of women in society as literature is a significant reflection of the times from which it comes into being. India's ancient past is not an exception in this regard as the peripheral position held by women in the ancient patriarchal culture of India for most part of our history can be seen to be reflected in the gender-relations depicted in our ancient epics, the *Dharma-shastra* and

other old texts where women have often been marginalized in terms of representation. In *The Mahabharata*, the voice of the woman is devalued by treating her as an object on many occasions in the epic or by defining her in extremely negative terms. One such instance of representation is found in Section XL of Anusasana Parva and is expressed by none other than the Kuru patriarch Bhishma who says about women to Yudhishtira, “There is no creature more sinful, O son, than women” [1]. Then Bhishma goes on to compare women with “fire,” “illusion,” “razor” [1] etc. Delineations of these kinds from the revered grandfather of the Kurus underline the insignificance of the voices of women in relation to those of the men in the epic. Not just in the Sanskrit epic but even in the ancient Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram*, the female protagonist Kannagi fails to find a voice of her own in a major part of the epic and when she does manages to give voice to her anguish at the end of the epic, she is metamorphosed into a goddess. In contrast to such kinds of representations, the poetry that relates to the emotions of desire and love between the opposite sexes has often given significant representation to the women’s experiences. The discourse of love poetry in ancient India has also given space to the events of women’s lives and that too in the voices of women. These voices lay bare before the readers the innermost recesses of a woman’s heart while exploring the different aspects of the emotions of love. In our present brief discussion, we will closely look at these voices by comparatively analysing the ancient Tamil *Akam* poetry and the Prakrit love poems of *Gāthā Saptasatī*, the two predominant kinds of ancient love poetry of our land. The purpose of our comparative analysis is to bring into focus the singularity and beauty of the female voices in these poems with the hope that the reader gets critically conscious about the varied nuances of these voices which would make the experience of reading these poems an enriching one for him or her. Both the types of poetry belong to the South India. While the *Akam* poetry is part of the classical Tamil literature which spans from around “c. 100 B.C.” to “A.D. 250” as A. K. Ramanujan says [2], *Gāthā Saptasatī* is traditionally attributed to king Hāla of Sātavāhana dynasty of first century AD. However as Peter Khoroché and Herman Tieken say in the Introduction of their translation, it is commonly believed that the work couldn’t have been composed so early and is rather considered to be composed “between the third century and the seventh” [3]. Thus, *Gāthā Saptasatī* which emerges at a later historical period than the ancient *Akam* poetry gives articulation to a unique kind of love poetry while having similar expressions of the joys of

lovers' union or the pains of separations as can also be found in the *Akam* poems. Let us now consider the framework of the *Akam* poetry in detail to comprehend the nuances of the voices that we experience here.

2. *Akam* Poetry & Suggestiveness

The *Akam* poetry is remarkable in its beautiful rendering of feelings of love and eroticism which are articulated through the images borrowed from natural surroundings. As is well-known to the readers of ancient Tamil poetics, the surroundings in ancient Tamil Poetics are demarcated into five different categories or *Tiṇais* on the basis of the variations of regions, time and the things or what A. K. Ramanujan calls the “native elements” [2] that are specifically found in a particular region. While region and time or the “first things” are together termed as *Mutal* [2], “native elements” are called *Karu* [2]. It is the combination of *Mutal* and *Karu* that together become the language of *Akam* poetry to evoke varied human experiences of love which in Tamil is called as *Uri* [2]. Let us see through an example of *Akam* poem that shows how *Uri* is expressed through *Mutal* and *Karu*, the storehouse of images in Tamil poetry:

In his fields, mother,
rain beats down,
sentinals watch.
Yet crabs cut down
the fresh white seedling [4].

The imagery of fertile fields and crabs puts the poem into the category of poems of *Marutam Tiṇai* that deals with infidelity of the lover. Thus, with the idea of infidelity in mind, the reader looks into the poem. The mentions of the “rain” and the crabs' destruction of the seedlings in the poem further allow the reader to make the right kind of associations regarding the man-woman relationship portrayed here. The idea of the “rain” in *Akam* poems is aligned with the union of the lovers. But the union that takes place here is violent in nature like the crabs' violence over the seedling. The lover's violence pertains to his faithlessness towards the beloved. Just as the potentials of the seedling of developing into a matured plant are crushed by the crabs, beloved's potential of happily participating in a blossoming relationship is nipped in the bud by her lover's attitude here. Thus, without explicitly

condemning the lover for his behaviour and through suggestiveness, the speaker draws the entire texture of the fractured relationship before the reader. Through the *Mutal* (“fields,” and “rains”) and *Karu* (“crabs”) *Uri* or human emotions are brought into focus in the poem. Therefore, as we can see through our analysis here, suggestiveness is one of the predominant characteristics of the voices of *Akam* poems and it is achieved through the elements of the *Tiṇais*. Let us look at few more examples to further understand the quality of suggestiveness in *Akam* poems.

In one of the *Akam* poems, the beloved underlines the pathos of separation by expressing how for lonely people the entire day takes the shape of a lonely evening [5]. In another poem, the beloved is compared to a “water lily” that is “trampled by white herons” in the phase of her separation from her lover [6]. The presence of the *Mullai* flower in the first poem underlines for the reader that the separation in the first poem is marked by patience, the defining human characteristic in the *Mullai Tiṇai*. The second poem also ruminates upon the separation of the lovers but here the phase of separation is characterised by anxiety than in the previous poem. The mentions of the “Seashore” [6] and “lily” in the poem along with the anxiety evident in the speaker place the poem in the category of *Neytal Tiṇai* that deal with the anxious phase of waiting. Thus, both the poems look at the theme of separation which has different levels of signification within the context of different *Tiṇais* of the poems. The presence of “herons” and their violent action towards the “water lily” in the second poem further add darker resonances to the relationship of the lovers in the poem as herons are usually represented in the *Akam* poems of *Marutam Tiṇai* that primarily deals with the break of trust in relationships of love as we have seen above. It must also be noted that the “herons” are described as “over-fed,” [6] a term that may be seen to characterize the herons as greedy and insatiable. Thus, we can see that the signifying world of the *Tiṇais* enables the reader to grasp the essence of the relationships through the medium of suggestiveness.

3. The World of *Gāthā Saptasatī*

The speakers of the *Akam* poetry through whose words are delineated the rich suggestiveness of *Akam* poems are primarily the women. Men also figure as speakers in this world, but the predominant position is occupied by the women. Women speakers include the heroine, her mother, her foster-mother and her girl friend. Let us now turn to *Gāthā Saptasatī* to see how

the text relates to suggestiveness while expressing emotions of love. The text of Prakrit love-poetry is not formally divided into different kinds of landscapes that are meant to signify the world of human emotions as we find in *Akam* poetry. Rather it is the village with its lanes, rice-fields, river Godāvārī etc; that become the predominant landscape of *Gāthā Saptasatī*. Within this world, different shades of the emotions of love are expressed mainly by women speakers (like in *Akam* poems) both through suggestions and also directly in plain language. In poems that figuratively represent love, the relationship between a bee and a flower plays significant role in implying different aspects of man-woman relationship. A man's desire for multiple partners of opposite sex, a man's slackening of desire towards his pregnant wife, desire for erotic union and also the very act of physical consummation all are suggested through the exchanges between the bees and flowers. Let us quote poem 610 in this regard:

O bee,
To get at the jasmine's nectar
You have to knead and squeeze long and hard.
It does not open by itself. [3]

Here, the woman makes it clear to the lover that he would not experience physical and emotional union with the woman of his desire without putting in more effort on his part. However, suggestiveness is achieved not only through the images of bees and flowers but through varied kinds of descriptions. In the poem 416, the river Narmadā's union with a stream becomes suggestive of a woman's extra-marital relationship [3]. Similarly, in the poem 407, the pathos of a lonely wife's condition becomes evident when the presence of the south wind is contradicted with the presence of a hard mother-in-law [3]. Thus, even though the signification system of the *Tīṇais* is not to be found in *Gāthā Saptasatī*, it has its own language of signifying a range of emotions through suggestiveness. It must also be noted here that since all the poems of *Gāthā Saptasatī* are in the form of couplets, suggestiveness has to be an intrinsic quality of the voices that we come across here as it is through this the varied strands of the gamut of emotions can be suggested to the reader within the limited space of the couplet. Besides suggestiveness, plain language is also employed by the women speakers to express themselves in *Gāthā Saptasatī* as can be seen in the poem 87 where the woman speaker expresses her sorrow for being disregarded by her lover in plain terms [3]. And in the poem 86, the speaker directly questions her lover regarding his neglect of her:

Are these the pleasure
For which I threw myself upon you . . .
And for lack of which my life
Now hangs in the balance? [3]

Such kinds of plain expressions are missing in the *Akam* poems as these poems are always situated within the suggestive world of the *Tiṇais*. We must also note that direct exchanges between the lovers as we have seen in the above-mentioned poem are not to be found in *Akam* poems where the women speakers primarily address their feelings for their lovers to their girl friends, mothers and foster-mothers or to their own selves.

4. The Voices of the Women in *Akam* poems and *Gāthā Saptasatī*

While taking into consideration the female voices in *Akam* poems and *Gāthā Saptasatī*, we must also note that these voices are presented as monologues which are often part of ongoing conversations that are distinguished as conversations through such kinds of addresses as “Bless you Mother, listen” [7] or “Listen. My friend” [8]. *Gāthā Saptasatī* registers the framework of conversations through such addresses as “You fool” [3], “You simpleton” [3] etc; that begin the Prakrit poems in the collection. In both the types of poetry under consideration, there are also monologues without any specific listeners and they are more like the addresses of the speaker to one’s own self. Female voices are also heard through dialogues that are sometimes incorporated in both types of poetry as can be seen in the Prakrit poem 476:

“Go to sleep! It’s past three o’clock!”
Dear girls, how can you say that to me?
The scent of jasmine makes sleep impossible. . . . [3]

Here the pathetic condition of the lonely wife in spring is expressed through an exchange of dialogue with her girlfriends.

It has already been mentioned previously that the voices of the women dominate in both *Akam* poems and *Gāthā Saptasatī*. However, we need to look at these voices in detail. *Akam* poetry begins by mentioning whether the speaker is the hero, heroine or someone related to them like heroine’s mother, hero or heroine’s friend, an acquaintance etc. In contrast, *Gāthā Saptasatī* doesn’t explicitly reveal the details of the speaker, and it has to be

assessed by the readers themselves through the content of the poems and the way a poem is addressed to the listener. Unlike *Akam* poems, there are also many poems in *Gāthā Saptasatī* which can be put in the mouth of either a male or female speaker as are the poems about the “Perfect Wife” [3]. In such poems, it is the message that the poem conveys that becomes significant rather than the speaker’s or listener’s position in it. It must also be noted that the speakers are not designated by any name and specific historical position in both kinds of poetry under consideration here. As these poems deal with universal passions that are felt by mankind across the ages, specific identity of the speaker becomes irrelevant here. A. K. Ramanujan mentions the same about *Akam* poems when he says, “The dramatis personae for *akam* are types. . . . The reason for such absence of individuals is implicit in the word *akam*: the ‘interior’ world is archetypal, it has no history, and no names of persons and places, except, now and then, in its metaphors” [2]. What Ramanujan says about *Akam* poems with respect to its characterization can also be applied in the case of *Gāthā Saptasatī* where instead of individuals we meet different character types like the “Traveller’s Wife,” [3], the “Perfect Wife” [3] etc. A contrast in this regard can be made here with the *Puram* poems of classical Tamil literature that often celebrated famous historical personalities like brave and magnanimous kings through its words.

5. Character Types in *Akam* poems and *Gāthā Saptasatī*

Both similarities and dissimilarities can be noticed in the delineation of the character types when we place *Akam* poems and *Gāthā Saptasatī* within the comparative framework. While some character types like the woman in love or the heroine of the poem, her close girl friends, and mother-like figures are common in both types of poetry, there are also differences here that must be considered. If we take the heroine’s mother or foster mother in *Akam* poems into consideration, we will notice that this is a figure of the guardian who has the responsibility of protecting the young heroine from the advances of the men around her. In one of the poems, the mother also expresses her sorrow when her girl escapes with the man of her love [9]. She is also the person to whom the heroine shares her pain and sorrow when betrayed in love. It is again the foster-mother to whom the heroine’s close friend reveals the experiences of the heroine in love. In *Gāthā Saptasatī* also maternal figures like the mother, aunt or mother-in-law often appear as speaker or listener. However, while the

mother-in-law often acts as the protective guardian of the young wife when her son is away from home (similar to the mothers of *Akam* poems), the figures of the aunty and mother are interesting in Prakrit poetry because as speakers, they give advice to both the man and woman in love about different aspects of love-relationship. Irrespective of the generation gap, suggestions regarding matters of love and sexuality are given to the listeners in a frank and friendly manner as is illustrated in the poem 59 where a maternal figure (can be either an aunt or mother) gives advice to the young son how he has to work hard to enjoy the pleasures of love [3]. Aunts and mothers also listen to joys and yearnings of love shared by young men and women as can be seen in the poem 178 where the speaker celebrates the joy of the lovers' "embrace" by describing it as "the prologue to the play of love" to his or her "auntie" [3]. Such kind of exuberant exclamations about bodily pleasures that are shared with motherly figures is missing in *Akam* poems. Even when in *Akam* poems the girl friend of the heroine expresses the heroine's yearnings for the hero to the foster-mother, it is done in a subtle manner as when she says how the heroine's eyes "fill with tears" when she loses sight of the "blue hills" associated with the lover in one of the poems [10].

Some of the other interesting character-types that we meet in *Gāthā Saptasatī* are the "Faithless Wife," [3] the "Abducted Wife" [3] or the "Go-between" [3] etc. These character-types assert that the capacious structure of *Gāthā Saptasatī* can accommodate within its range varied kinds of female voices giving expressions to varied emotions of love. The presence of these character-types also signifies that love can emerge and dominate in the most unexpected situations such as the abducted wife's emotions for her kidnapper in poem 425 [3]. Similarly, the character-type of the "Faithless Wife" is also interesting here. "The Faithless Wife," as the name suggests, is the one who does not maintain marital fidelity towards her husband. However, instead of merely focusing upon the reckless pursuit of pleasures of such a wife, the humane perspective of *Gāthā Saptasatī* emerges from the fact that it also incorporates female voices that express the utterly lonely condition of a young housewife when away from her husband that turns her towards seeking partners beyond her husband. We can take for instance the poem 407 where the young wife bemoans her miserable condition in spring (the time of the year that is associated with lovers' union in love poetry of ancient India) when her mother-in-law "keeps her locked-up indoors" [3]. There are also many poems in *Gāthā Saptasatī* that speak about the "perfect wife" who is the

paragon of domestic virtues. But these poems cannot put into silence the voices of so-called Faithless wives thereby underlining the democratic spirit of *Gāthā Saptaśatī*. In *Akam* poems, infidelity is shown to be the trait of men and not associated with women which shows the conventional nature of classical Tamil poetry of love that cannot conceive of women involved in erotic relationships with more than one man at the same time. Just like the Faithless Wife or the Abducted Wife in *Gāthā Saptaśatī*, the role of the “Go-between” here also testifies to the overpowering influence of love over human heart. While the usual function of go-between in these poems is to be the means of communication between the two lovers, she herself sometimes fails to prevent herself from falling in love with her friend’s lover as can be seen in poem 139 [3]. In *Akam* poems also we get the figure of the heroine’s girl friend whose role is similar to that of the Go-between of *Gāthā Saptaśatī* but who performs the usual function of helping the heroine in various ways in coping with the experience of love but who herself is not seen to succumb to it as can be seen in the Prakrit love poems. Thus, the canvas on which *Gāthā Saptaśatī* portrays the emotions of love becomes larger in dimensions than the *Akam* poems on account of the varied kind of female voices we hear in the former that bring out the multiple layers of the emotions of love. *Akam* poems primarily delineate the emotions of love through the heroine, her girl friends or her mother or foster-mother within the context of female voices. However, in few instances we also get to hear the voice of the concubines as in the poem where the concubine contrasts the loving togetherness she enjoys in the presence of her lover to the wretched loneliness of her condition in his absence [11]. The emotional richness of the poem emerges from the fact that the concubine’s words assert the similarity in the pathetic conditions of the lonely wife and the lonely concubine when bereft of the man of their lives as these are spoken in response to the wife’s complaints against the trickery of the concubine. The concubine’s words subtly underline the fact that both the women are losers in this game of love.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that in the context of the love poetry of ancient times, both *Akam* poems and *Gāthā Saptaśatī* usher the readers to the sumptuous feast of love where one is assured the holistic experience of love through the beauty of the Tamil and Prakrit languages. In our brief comparative analysis of both kinds of poetry, we have attempted to look at this

experience by focusing upon the female voices we come across here. Our analysis has underlined the centrality of the women's experiences and women speakers in the context of these poems. The variations in the voices that we have discussed so far in the context of two kinds of poetry have also shown to us how the same feeling of love is evoked in multiple ways which never allow the reader to feel a sense of platitude while going through these enriching collections. It must also be added at the end that these varied kind of female voices of both the collections of love poetry allow the readers of today to get rare glimpses of the daily lives lived by the women of our past while articulating the eternal emotions of love to which the readers of all the ages can relate. Last but not the least, it can be said that the contemporary times have changed the dynamics of love where people are lost between, as Neelima Talwar says, "career on one side, partner on another side, and family and responsibilities on another side . . . [12]." Times have indeed changed but the emotions of longing and passion for lover or the feeling of growing estrangement between partners were there in the past and are also very much present today. Therefore, female voices of *Gāthā Saptasatī* or *Akam* poems would be pertinent sites of engagement for poets of today's generation who eloquently clothe in words the emotions of heart within the context of contemporary times. The present study looks forward to many resourceful future endeavours in this direction that would focus upon the hitherto unexplained areas of relevance of *Gāthā Saptasatī* or *Akam* poems for contemporary love poetry.

References

- [1] Vyasa, Krishna-Dwaipayana (1883-1896). *The Mahabharata* (Kisari Mohan Ganguli, Trans.). sacred-texts.com. <https://sacred-texts.com/hin/maha/index.htm>.
- [2] *Poems of love and war* (A. K. Ramanujan, Selected by and Trans.). (2022). Oxford UP.
- [3] *Hāla's Sattasatī (Gāthā Saptasatī in Prakrit): Poems of life and love in ancient India* (Peter Khoroché & Herman Tieken, Trans.; Reprinted Indian ed.). (2022). Motilal Banarsidass.
- [4] Ōrampōkiyār (2022). *Aiñkurunūru* 29 (A. K. Ramanujan, Selected by and Trans.). In *Poems of love and war* (p. 100). Oxford UP.

- [5] Kantan, Milaipperuñ (2022). *Kuruntokai* 234 (A. K. Ramanujan, Selected by and Trans.). In *Poems of love and war* (p. 67). Oxford UP.
- [6] Anon., (2022). *Narriṇai* 183 (A. K. Ramanujan, Selected by and trans.). In *Poems of love and war* (p. 42). Oxford UP.
- [7] Kapilar (2022). *Aiṅkurunūru* 210 (A. K. Ramanujan, Selected by and Trans.). In *Poems of love and war* (p. 13). Oxford UP.
- [8] Kapilar (2022). *Aiṅkurunūru* 205 (A. K. Ramanujan, Selected by and Trans.). In *Poems of love and war* (p. 11). Oxford UP.
- [9] Anon., (2022). *Narriṇai* 179 (A. K. Ramanujan, Selected by and trans.). In *Poems of love and war* (p. 65). Oxford UP.
- [10] Kapilar (2022). *Aiṅkurunūru* 208 (A. K. Ramanujan, Selected by and Trans.). In *Poems of love and war* (p.12). Oxford UP.
- [11] Villakaviraliṅār (“The Poet of the Fingers Around a Bow”) (2022). *Kuruntokai* 370 (A. K. Ramanujan, Selected by and Trans.). In *Poems of love and war* (p. 102). Oxford UP.
- [12] Talwar, Neelima (2024). *Love today: Contemporary poems from India* (Kindle ed.) p. 1.
<https://www.amazon.in/Love-today-Contemporary-poems-India-ebook/dp/B0CW1HJBHQ>