



## Messenger (Thūthu) in Akathinai Literature

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### Abstract

Akathinai literature, a core component of Sangam Tamil tradition, focuses on the inner world of love and human emotions. One of its most distinctive features is the concept of Thūthu (messenger), through which emotions, intentions, and conflicts between lovers are communicated. Unlike conventional messengers, Akathinai poetry employs a wide range of symbolic agents such as friends (thozhi), bards (pānan), dancers (virali), birds, animals, plants, and natural elements like wind, clouds, moon, sea, and evening time. These messengers function not merely as carriers of information but as expressive devices reflecting psychological states such as longing, sorrow, hope, and impatience. The friend occupies a central role as a mediator, advisor, and emotional anchor, while nature-based messengers reveal the deep ecological consciousness of Sangam society and its intimate bond with the natural world. Through the use of Thūthu, Akathinai literature transforms private emotions into poetic expression, highlighting the emotional depth, symbolic richness, and refined aesthetic sensibility of ancient Tamil culture.

**Keywords:** Akathinai, thūthu (messenger), sangam literature, love poetics, thozhi (friend), symbolic communication, nature as messenger, birds and animals in poetry, human emotions, tamil poetics, psychological expression, ecological consciousness, inner life (akam), classical tamil literature

### Introduction

Sangam literature occupies a unique and eminent place in classical Tamil tradition, particularly for its profound exploration of human emotions and social life. Among its two major divisions—Akathinai and Purathinai—Akathinai focuses on the inner world of love, personal relationships, and emotional experiences. One of the most distinctive literary devices employed in Akathinai poetry is Thūthu, or the concept of the messenger, which serves as a vital medium of communication between lovers. In Akathinai literature, direct expression of love is often restrained by social norms, modesty, and cultural conventions. As a result, emotions such as longing, separation, anxiety, and hope are conveyed indirectly through messengers. These messengers are not limited to human figures; they include the friend (thozhi), bards, dancers, birds, animals, plants, and natural elements such as wind, clouds, the moon, the sea, and evening time. Through these symbolic agents, the inner feelings of the hero and heroine are articulated in subtle and aesthetically refined ways. The thozhi occupies a central position as the primary mediator, counselor, and emotional support for the heroine, while nature-based messengers reflect the intimate relationship between human life and the natural world in Sangam society. Thus, the concept of Thūthu in Akathinai literature not only enriches poetic expression but also reveals the psychological depth, cultural values, and ecological awareness of ancient Tamil civilization.

### The Unique Excellence of Tamil

Porul Ilakkanam. The unique distinction of the Tamil language—sweeter even than nectar—is its Porul Ilakkanam (Grammar of Life/Content). While other languages possess grammars for letters (orthography) and words (morphology), they lack a "grammar of content" that analyzes the lived experiences of a people. When Sangam poets chose human life as the subject of their poetry, they classified it into two categories: Akathinai and Purathinai.

### Akathinai: The Grammar of Love

Akathinai refers to the conduct of love. It encompasses the stages of union, separation, waiting, lamenting, and sulking. When a poet describes the romantic conduct between a hero and a heroine, they may either choose to mention specific names or remain anonymous.

**Akathinai:** Verses where the individual's name is not mentioned.

**Purathinai:** Verses that mention specific names in the context of love, as well as verses regarding war and other social virtues. The essence of Akathinai—love and desire—is common to all sentient beings, whether human (Uyarthinai) or non-human (Ahrinai). As the immortal poet Tolkappiyar noted: "Pleasure, for all living beings, is a natural inclination that arises from within." This suggests that love is an inherent part of our nature, tied to our very existence from birth.

### Statistical Insights into Sangam Literature

Of the 2,371 total Sangam Tamil poems, we know that 1,852 are dedicated to Akathinai. Out of the 473 Sangam scholars, 378 specialized specifically in Akathinai. These poems are largely composed in a dramatic convention (Nadaka Vazhakku), serving as expressions of the inner feelings of the hero, the heroine, and the confidante (friend).

### A Psychological Perspective

When studying these Sangam love poems, we encounter the inner psyche of men and women in every verse. Through these poems, we gain insight into the thoughts and perspectives of various characters: the hero, the heroine, the friend, the companion, the dancer, the bard, the courtesan, the mother, the foster mother, the villagers, the wayfarer, and the onlookers. By analyzing these nuances, the diverse states of the human mind are revealed. This creates a clear

realization that these works must be studied with psychological insight and intellectual depth.

### **Nature and Human Emotion in Sangam Life**

The people of that era embraced a way of life that was harmoniously intertwined with nature. They projected their emotions onto the natural world and found joy in observing the communal lives of birds and animals.

### **The Role of the Confidante (Thozhi)**

It is the duty of the Thozhi (the heroine's friend) to stand by the heroine, offering counsel and comfort during her periods of longing and grief when separated from the hero. Often, the Thozhi acts as a messenger. However, when the heroine is alone without her friend, her distress intensifies. In such moments of overwhelming yearning, it was customary for the hero, heroine, or friend to address elements of nature as messengers.

### **The Secret Love Phase (Kalavu)**

During the phase of secret courtship (Kalavu), the hero might sometimes delay the formal marriage. For a virtuous and wise woman, it is considered improper and against tradition to cast aside her modesty and demand that the hero marry her immediately. Instead, she finds solace in sharing her expectations and longing openly with her clever friend. However, there are times when even the friend cannot provide adequate comfort. Unable to suppress her emotions, the heroine opens her heart to the natural objects surrounding her. Whether it is the millet crop or the garden vine, she implores them to understand her pain. She calls upon the birds to act as envoys, asking them to convey her suffering to the hero so that he may realize his duty. This act brings her a sense of satisfaction and peace.

### **The Virtuous Household Phase (Karpuz)**

Once the secret love matures into a married life (Karpuz), tradition dictates that the hero may travel abroad to earn wealth to ensure the family's prosperity. Hospitality (Virunthombal) is considered the primary duty of a noble life, and wealth is necessary to sustain it. The hero departs after promising to return by a specific season. The heroine's sole task then becomes counting the days until his arrival. Nature acts as a reminder of the promised time—flowers bloom and spread their fragrance, and bees hum as they seek nectar. These sights and sounds often intensify the heroine's sorrow of separation. To express her unbearable grief, she sends the bee, heron, parrot, crow, owl, the north wind, the moon, the evening, or the clouds as messengers to urge the hero to return quickly.

### **The Strategy of the Thozhi**

The friend acts as a bridge between the couple. When the hero lingers in the courtship phase without formalizing the marriage, the friend may criticize or rebuke him. Sometimes, while the hero is listening secretly nearby (Siraipuram), the friend will pretend not to notice him. She will address the birds in the vicinity, telling them her thoughts and asking them to relay the message to the heroine. By hearing these words indirectly, the hero is made to realize his responsibility and takes the necessary steps to marry the heroine promptly.

### **The Bee as a Messenger in Akathinai Literature**

In our study of Akathinai (Love) literature, we frequently observe the bee being sent as a messenger. This is because

the bee is a common creature found in the landscapes of both the hero and the heroine.

### **A Grievance to the Bee (Narrinai)**

In a poem from Narrinai, the hero has departed for a foreign land to earn wealth without marrying the heroine. Unable to bear the sorrow of separation, the heroine calls upon a bee, shares her mental agony, and commands it to bring the hero back quickly.

"O cruel bee! May you live long! You drank nectar from the dense clusters of the Peerkam (sponge gourd) flowers. In return, you failed to go to my loveless hero, who has crossed the difficult mountains and deserts, to tell him of my suffering and urge his return. Is it because your body is black that your intellect has also turned black (dark/cruel)?"

"The heroine is well aware that the bee does not truly possess the power to understand her request and immediately bring the hero back. However, by expressing her feelings, she feels a slight sense of relief from her yearning and pain.

### **Strategy of the Confidante (Kurunthogai)**

Similarly, in Kurunthogai, the heroine is kept under strict guard by her parents, making it impossible for her to meet the hero. Knowing that the hero is hiding nearby (Siraipuram), the friend speaks to a bee—intending for the hero to overhear—about the heroine's confinement and the necessity of marriage.

"O bee with beautiful wings like blue sapphires! May you live long. Listen to what I say; there is no need to fear speaking good words to someone. If you go toward the hero's mountainside, tell him that the heroine is in a state where she cannot leave her parents' watch.

### **The Role of the Millet Field and Parrots**

One of the heroine's duties is to guard the millet fields (Thinai) to prevent birds from eating the ripening grain. It is during these guarding shifts that the hero and heroine usually meet and nurture their secret love. However, in one instance, the parents become suspicious and confine the heroine to the house. She weeps daily, longing for the hero. When the hero arrives and hides near the house to catch a glimpse of her, the friend notices him. She begins to describe the heroine's plight by addressing a flock of parrots in a nearby tree, ensuring the hero hears the message.

### **The Message to the Parrots**

The friend (Thozhi) addresses a flock of parrots to indirectly inform the hero of the heroine's confinement:

"O curved-beaked parrots! You come with your kin to feast upon the bent stalks of the millet, which resemble the trunks of young elephants. This millet field is now being destroyed without protection because the heroine has been barred from guarding it. Go to the hero—who wears a cool garland of water lilies and carries a well-crafted bow—and explain her situation clearly.

"By treating the parrots as messengers, the friend informs the hidden hero that if he does not act quickly to marry her, the "affliction" of her pining will consume her, especially now that she is no longer allowed to leave her home for the fields.

### **The White Heron as a Confidante**

When the heroine is overwhelmed by loneliness, she often seeks solace by speaking to birds and natural elements like

the moon and clouds. In one instance, she pleads with a white heron to convey her grief:

"O white heron with black legs! You have fed in the curved waters and are ready to fly with your kin. Stay a moment and listen to me. This evening hour brings me immense sorrow. If you have any compassion, do not be indifferent. Go to the lord of the maritime shores—where the young Nyazhal trees bud and the clear waves stroke the mangroves—and describe my plight exactly as it is, so that he may come to marry me.

"In this moment of desperation, she casts aside her natural shyness and fear to send the heron as her envoy, hoping for a resolution to her waiting.

### **The Hero's Message to the North Wind**

It is not only the heroine who suffers; the hero, too, is consumed by thoughts of her during his journey. Though he strives to return at the promised time, delays sometimes occur. Once, while racing back in his chariot after finishing his task, he encounters a strong North Wind (Vaadai). He addresses the wind, asking it to be gentle with his beloved:

"Long live the North Wind! The town of my virtuous beloved is situated near a high mountain peak where white waterfalls hang like the sloughed skin of a snake. Her home is a small, grass-thatched hut where deer gather in the front yard to eat fallen amla fruits. Go there, but do not distress her; rather, protect her.

### **The Strategic Wisdom of the Thozhi**

In Akathinai literature, the confidante (Thozhi) is portrayed as an expert in understanding the heroine's changing emotional states. She is skilled at fulfilling the heroine's needs promptly and through the most appropriate means. When secret daytime meetings (Pagarkuri) become too risky, she advises the hero to shift to nighttime meetings (Iravukkuri). To ensure the hero's safety as he navigates obstacles to reach the heroine's village at night, the friend employs various clever tactics. A poem from Narrinai illustrates this beautifully:

### **Bribing the Owl**

Knowing the hero has arrived for a secret night meeting, the friend speaks to an owl, asking it not to hoot and alert the village:

"O powerful owl with the curved beak, clear eyes, and sharp claws! You live upon the ancient, thick tree where the deity resides by the pond. We shall offer you a feast of white rice mixed with ghee and meat. For the sake of our lover who comes with great affection, do not shriek with your harsh voice while we lie awake in longing. Do not frighten the villagers and cause us more sorrow!"

### **Encountering the Crops**

The connection to nature was so deep that heroines even addressed the plants. The hero and heroine often met in the Thinaï (millet) fields while guarding the crops. Once the grain ripens and is harvested, the heroine would no longer have an excuse to visit the field, ending their secret meetings. To prevent this separation, the heroine pleads with the millet plants to delay their ripening so she can continue guarding the field and meeting her lover. Human Messengers: Panan and Virali Beyond nature, the Sangam people utilized human intermediaries to bridge emotional gaps:

**The Panan (Bard):** Acts as a student or messenger. In Kurunthogai, a heroine tells her friend that after hearing the gentle words of the young Panan who came as a messenger, her anger toward the hero vanished.

**The Virali (Dancer) & Pangan (Companion):** These characters were essential in both secret love (Kalavu) and married life (Karpu). Specifically, when a hero sought the company of courtesans (Parathaiyar), he would later send a Virali or a Panan to the heroine to seek her forgiveness and describe his enduring love.

### **Anguish Addressed to the Sea and the Flute**

In times of neglect, when the hero delays the marriage, the friend expresses her frustration by addressing the sea and even musical instruments:

**To the Sea:** "O cold sea with never-ending waves! Do you roar because you recognize my sorrow—that my lord of the shores has abandoned me? Or have you, like me, lost a beloved companion who once treated you with kindness?"

**To the Flute:** "O beautiful small flute! Do you wail in this gathering darkness because you see the grief of one who is alone? Or do you also have a lover who once brought joy but has now departed to cause you pain?" While these natural objects cannot speak back, expressing these feelings provided the characters with psychological relief and satisfaction.

### **A Life Integrated with Nature**

Whether it was secret courtship or domestic life, the people of the Sangam era relied on everything around them—birds, wind, sea, and fellow humans—as companions and messengers. This literature clearly demonstrates a society that lived in total harmony with its environment, using "Porul Ilakkanam" to map the complexities of the human heart onto the world around them.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of Thūthu (messenger) occupies a significant and multifaceted role in Akathinai literature, serving as a powerful poetic device through which the inner emotions of lovers are expressed. In a social context where direct communication between the hero and heroine is often constrained, messengers function as essential intermediaries who convey longing, sorrow, hope, reconciliation, and moral counsel. Whether human or non-human, these messengers transform personal emotions into refined literary expressions. The thozhi stands out as the most crucial messenger, acting as mediator, guide, and emotional anchor, while bards, dancers, and companions extend this role within social boundaries. Equally important are the symbolic messengers drawn from nature—birds, animals, plants, wind, clouds, the moon, the sea, and time itself—which reflect the deep ecological consciousness and emotional sensitivity of Sangam society. Through Thūthu, Akathinai poetry reveals an intimate bond between human experience and the natural world. Ultimately, the messenger tradition in Akathinai literature highlights the psychological depth, cultural sophistication, and aesthetic excellence of classical Tamil poetry, making it a timeless testament to the emotional and artistic richness of the Sangam age.

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