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## Representation of Kama Theory in Kurunthogai

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### ABSTRACT

*Kama* is commonly understood as desire in broader theoretical traditions and often get associated with physical attraction and union. However, within early Tamil culture and literature, desire assumes a more inward and subtle form. Rather than being openly articulated, it is felt, experienced, and conveyed through emotional depth and poetic imagination. Tamil culture does not foreground explicit discussions of desire; instead, it privileges an internalized experience where feeling takes over physical fulfilment. Specifically in the Sangam Literature text, *Kurunthogai*, lovers are not always united physically, yet their emotional connection remains intense and meaningful. The happiness they share is vividly visualized through landscapes, symbols, and symbolic imagery and not through proximity of people. Nature here becomes a silent participant, reflecting inner states and transforming personal emotions into collective aesthetic experience.

Beyond the Sanskrit traditional narrative of desire as an outward force driving the lover toward union and physical consummation, *Kurunthogai* locates *Kama*'s most authentic expression in *Viraha*, in the waiting body, the sovereign imagination, and the emotional world of the one who is left behind. Through the *Tinai* system, the text transforms an interior and private experience into a shared, universal grammar of feeling that transcends the historical and cultural moments to speak to the condition of longing itself. This paper argues that *Kurunthogai* does not simply offers an alternative representation of desire but reconceptualizes what *Kama* is and where it lives which remains as urgent and intimate today as it was two thousand years ago.

**Keywords:** *Kama* (Desire), Tamil Culture, Emotional Experience, *Tinai* System, *Viraha*, Interiorization.



## Introduction

Desire is perhaps the most fundamental and inescapable experience of human life. Across cultures and traditions, desire has been named, theorized, celebrated, and feared, but rarely has it been understood with as much degree and emotional depth as in classical Indian tradition, which has one of the most systematic concepts of *Kama*<sup>1</sup>.

*Kama* denotes desire in all its dimensions, be it physical longing, emotional attachment, sensory pleasure, and the profound human need for connection and union with another. It is one of the four *Purusharthas*<sup>2</sup>, alongside *Dharma* (moral duty), *Artha* (material pursuit), and *Moksha* (spiritual liberation). As a *Purushartha*, *Kama* is not shallow or shameful; it is acknowledged as a legitimate and one of the necessary dimensions of human existence, which sustains life, drives creativity, and gives meaning to personal experience.

Yet, within the Tamil literary tradition, *Kama* assumes a character distinctly its own. Tamil culture does not foreground desire as an outward, declarative, or physically enacted experience. Instead, it privileges an understanding of *Kama* that is deeply internalized, which is felt rather than spoken, imagined rather than fulfilled, and expressed through the quiet language of landscape, memory, and longing. Desire in Sangam literature is not something that drives the lover toward union; it is something that lives within, aching and patient, which finds its voice in the rustle of a forest or the sound of the waves. Sangam poetries like *Mullaipattu*, *Kurinjipattu*, *Kurunthogai*, *Akananuru*, etc. follow the same concept. This study centers around *Kurunthogai*, one of the earliest and most celebrated anthologies of classical Tamil Sangam literature under *Ettuthokai*<sup>3</sup>, situated in a distinct understanding of desire. *Kurunthogai* comprises 401 short *Akam* (interior) poems attributed to over 200 poets, both men and women. It is governed by the *Tinai* system, where five different landscapes- *Kurinji* (mountains), *Mullai* (forests), *Marutham* (agricultural land), *Neithal* (coastal region), and *Palai* (Desert Land), each represent a different emotional state of love. It was compiled and edited by Purikko, mapping the full emotional terrain of love through restraint, separation, and imagination; offering a vision of *Kama* that is ancient and intimate simultaneously.

## *Kama* in Tamil *Akam* Poetics

*Kama* occupies a carefully theorized position in the *Purushartha* framework as discussed above. In the contemporary world, *kama* is reduced to the domain of physical gratification; it is looked at through the lens that privileges the body as the primary site of desire. However, *kama* also transcends mere sensual indulgence; it is more psychological, dissolving the boundaries between the mind and body. That is why, in *Purushartha*, *Kama* is considered an important pillar. Its most systematic treatment appears in Vatsayana's

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<sup>1</sup> *Kama*: signifies desire, wish, passion, emotions, and pleasure of the senses, the aesthetic enjoyment of life, affection, or love, with or without lustful connotations. *Kama* is one of the four *Purusarths*, the other three *Purusarths* are *Dharma* (righteousness), *Artha* (prosperity), and *Moksha* (liberation, self-realization).

<sup>2</sup> *Purusharth*: *Purusharth* (புருஷார்த்த) derived from the Sanskrit term *Purusha* (புருஷ) and *Artha* (அர்த்த). *Purusha* means "spirit", "immaterial essence", or "primaeva human being as the soul and original source of the universe", depending on the *darsana*, the school of thought. *Artha* in one context means "purpose", "object of desire" and "meaning". Together, *Purushartha* literally means "purpose of human being" or "object of human pursuit".

<sup>3</sup> *Ettuthokai*: *Ettuthokai* (எட்டுத்தொகை) derived from the classical Tamil terms *Ettu* (எட்டு) and *Thokai* (தொகை). *Ettu* means "eight". *Thokai* means "collection", "anthology", or "compilation". Together, *Ettuthokai* literally means "the eight anthologies" or "a collection of eight", referring to the corpus of eight classical Sangam Tamil poetic collections.

*Kamasutra's* book 1, chapter II, where *Kama* is defined as the enjoyment of objects by the senses, “*assisted by the mind together with the soul*” which implies that desire here is outward and embodied; it is a force oriented towards the beloved, toward pursuit, and physical and emotional consummation. Before that too, *Kama* comes as the first movement of creation in the *Rigveda*, personified as *Kamadeva*, the god who shoots flower-tipped arrows at lovers’ heart, strengthening the understanding of desire as something that arrives from outside and overwhelms. *Kama*, in the Sanskrit tradition, is an incoming force that strikes and compels the lover toward itself.

Sangam literature, composed roughly between 300 BCE and 300 CE, organizes itself around the *Puram* (the outer world of war and public life) and *Akam* (the inner world of love and private emotion). However, in the Tamil *Akam* poetic tradition of *Kurunthogai*, *Kama* is declarative; it turns inward and finds its truest form in longing. *Kurunthogai* comprises 401 short *Akam* poems belonging entirely to the interior tradition. Unlike Sanskrit love poetry, *Akam* poems name no one, the speakers are only identified as *taliavi* (heroine), *talaivan* (hero), and *thozhi* (companion). As A.K. Ramanujan in his “*The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology*” argues that this anonymity is a deliberate philosophical choice; it lifts desire out and makes it a shared human condition.

In *Kurunthogai*, *Kama* turns inward because the beloved is absent with no one to move towards where, desire retreats into memory and imagination. The heroine does not speak to her lover but to the natural world, addressing the seabirds, the waves, and the trees which are not external distractions but mirrors of her interior state; she exists more vividly inside her imagination than in the physical reality. Most significantly, *Kurunthogai* presents *Viraha*<sup>4</sup> not as the absence of love but as its most authentic form, unlike Sanskrit tradition where union is the destination usually.

For instance, in *Kurunthogai* 202, the heroine says nothing beyond “*my lover who used to be sweet has become cruel now. My heart aches*” without any name or context, only the raw emotion. In poem 218, she declares, “*he is the love of my life*”. The absence of any identity here makes the feeling immediately universal. The speakers could be anyone, anywhere, and that is precisely the point. *Kama* in *Kurunthogai* does not belong to a person, it belongs to the condition of loving itself.

### **The Universal Grammar of Desire: *Kama* as a Human Condition**

*Kurunthogai* discusses the desire in a way that distinguishes it from other works, it only speaks of emotions, the purest of emotions in *Kama*. There’s no particular woman waiting by the shore, or a woman simply waiting. And yet across two thousand years, these poems continue to feel deeply personal to the readers of any age who study it, if a sixteen-year-old individual can enjoy it, then a sixty-year-old can also relate to it. That’s because these poems are not socially specific or personally identified through body, age, caste, race, etc. which allows no discrimination towards anyone, hence, making it universal.

While *Kurunthogai* occasionally mentions real places, such as *Thondi* and *Nalli* in poem 210, these places are not used to tell us where the story happens, they are used to deepen what is being felt. For instance, *Thondi* is not mentioned as a geographical location, it is mentioned as the place that produces the finest *ghee* which the *thozhi* (friend) uses to express how much gratitude the heroine owes to a crow that

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<sup>4</sup> *Viraha*: *Viraha* (विरह) derived from the Sanskrit prefix Vi (वि) and the root Raha (रह), from the verbal root *Rah* (रह). Vi is a prefix meaning “apart”, “away”, or “without”, conveying the sense of separation or absence. Raha, from the root *Rah*, means “to leave”, “to abandon”, or “to remain alone”. Together, *Viraha* literally means “being apart” or “state of separation”, and by extension denotes the acute longing, anguish, and emotional desolation caused by separation from a beloved, a condition elevated in Indian poetic and devotional traditions to a spiritual and aesthetic experience in its own right.

called a good omen while she waited for her lover. The place becomes a measure of emotion, not a marker of location. This is what separates *Kurunthogai* from Sanskrit love poetry where named places establish social context and narrative setting, like in Kalidasa's *Meghaduta* where geography creates the social and narrative context, contrary to *Kurunthogai*, in which emotions consume the geography entirely.

At the emotional level, the poem reduces itself to the themes of longing, waiting, imagination, and silence throughout, preceding culture and history. The hero's friend in poem 204 declares, "*love is not a terrible thing or a disease — it is a feast*", addressed not to one person but to anyone who has ever been overwhelmed by desire. The unnamed *talaivi* is every woman who has loved and waited. *Kama* in *Kurinthogai* is not a cultural artifact; it is a grammar of feeling that anyone, anywhere, in any century can immediately recognize as their own.

### **The Interiorization of *Kama*: Desire as an Inward Experience**

In most literary traditions, desire is a journey; it begins within and moves outward, towards the beloved, then towards pursuit, and then towards union. It is restless and defined by its destination. But in *Kurunthogai*, desire arrives and then, finding nowhere to go, it turns back. It retreats into the only space that is truly and completely available to the heroine i.e., herself. And it is in the interior, in memory, in imagination and in the quiet devastation of the waiting body that *Kama* finds its most honest and enduring form.

Interiorization is most evident in the way the heroine's body becomes the text on which desires inscribe itself involuntarily and without permission. In the poem 205, the heroine does not say that she is devastated by her lover's departure. Instead, she asks her companion, "*how did the pallor that has spread on my honey-fragrant, beautiful forehead know about it?*" The body already knows what the mind has not yet processed. Desire does not wait to be felt consciously; it surfaces on the skin, in the loosening of bangles, in the loss of appetite before the heroine herself has understood what she is experiencing. In the poem 216, she lies on her bed while her bangles slip down her thinning wrists and black clouds rumble outside, "they are after my sweet life", she says. Here, the external world and her deteriorating interior have become indistinguishable. She is not describing grief; she is living inside it so completely that the sky itself feels hostile. This projection of the inner world through the surrounding natural elements, with the help of someone else provides a sense of emotional catharsis to the one whose thoughts are externalized in the world.

The interiorization here is not passive suffering, it is an active, almost sovereign relationship with one's own emotional life. In the poem 218, the heroine declares, "*he is the life of my life; I cannot be away from him even for a wink of time*" and then lists everything she will refuse to do if he is capable of forgetting her. She will not make offerings, will not tie ritual thread, and will not think about him. This is not a woman destroyed by desire; this is a woman who has fully inhabited her desire and is negotiating with it on her own terms. *Kama* here is not something that happens to the heroine; it is something she owns, entirely from within.

### ***Tinai*: Nature as the Language of Desire**

Every deep interior emotion faces the same impossible challenge; it must find a way to be expressed in a world that only sees surfaces. In *Kurunthogai*, this challenge is resolved not through confession or declaration but through the *Tinai* system, which has five landscape conventions functioning as a shared emotional grammar between the poet and the reader. Each landscape encodes a specific phase of love: *Kurinji* (mountains) for union, *Mullai* (forests) for waiting, *Marutam* (river valleys) for infidelity, *Neytal* (seashore) for separation, and *Palai* (wasteland) for prolonged parting. The landscape does not illustrate the emotion, it is the emotion, rendered in natural form.



*Kurinji* belongs to the mountains and encodes the joy of first love. In poem 201, the heroine speaks of bats that feed on sweet mangoes and “*hang on the tall, beautiful, thornless bamboos in nearby groves.*” The abundance of the mountain world holds within it the pleasure of new love, undisturbed and complete. *Mullai* belongs to the forest and encodes patient waiting. In poem 210, a single crow's cry ends the distress that had made the heroine's arms grow thin, and the *thozhi* (friend) declares that even seven pots of the finest rice would be too small a reward for it. A bird's call becomes the language of reunion. *Marutam* belongs to the river valleys and encodes infidelity. In poem 202, the heroine compares her unfaithful lover to the *nerunji* plant whose flowers “*appear sweet to the eyes but yield thorns later.*” The blossom does not symbolize betrayal; instead, it becomes its precise shape. *Neytal* belongs to the seashore and encodes separation. In poem 205, the heroine watches her lover ride away on a chariot whose wheels are “*wet with spray from the churning ocean,*” and asks how the pallor had already spread across her forehead before she had fully understood his departure. *Palai* belongs to the wasteland and encodes prolonged parting. In poem 207, a lone kite sits on an ancient mountain path, crying as “*the only companion to those who travel across the dry wasteland.*” The kite is not a symbol placed beside the emotion; it is the loneliness, given a body and a cry.

This is the *Tinai* system's deepest function is that it dissolves the boundary between interior and exterior entirely. The seashore is not where the heroine stands, it is what she feels. People and environment in *Kurunthogai* are not two separate things connected by metaphor, they are one continuous emotional world.

### **Mental Union over Physical Union**

#### I) When the Hero is Present

It is one of the most prominent ironies of *Kurunthogai* that even when the lovers are together, what the poems dwell on is not physical union but the emotional experience of it. In the poem 208, the heroine tells her *thozhi*, “*I am one of the same mind as the man from the mountains*” and then she immediately qualifies it with “*however, there is one reason for my disagreement.*” The hero is present, the relationship is intact, and yet her primary concern is the alignment of their inner worlds, not their physical proximity. Union here is not a physical state; it is a mental correspondence. In poem 206, the hero tells his friend, “*her beautiful, sweet words are like nectar*”, the body of the beloved is never described, only what she makes him feel inside throughout.

#### II) When the Hero is Absent

If presence is already interior, absence deepens the interiority to its most extreme form. In the poem 209, the hero, while crossing harsh mountains where tiger cubs roam, tells the *thozhi*, “*I did not think about many things, I thought about my friendship with the young woman with the dark thick hair.*” He is physically moving through the world, he is entirely with her, mentally. Distance does not separate them; it makes their mental connection more vivid than physical closeness ever could. In poem 215, the *thozhi* consoles the heroine with the image of a tusked elephant protecting his mate across a harsh, waterless wasteland, arguing that the hero carries the heroine within him even across the greatest distance. Separation is not the failure of love in *Kurunthogai*, it is a proof. Here, *Kama* is a union that exists not between two bodies in the same place but between two minds that carry each other regardless of where they are.

Taken together, the dimensions explored, *Kurunthogai* operates simultaneously as an aesthetic, cultural, and social experience. Aesthetically, the *Tinai* system transforms raw longing into something formally precise and emotionally inexhaustible; the image does not describe the feeling; it is the feeling. Culturally, the text constructs an ideal of desire rooted not in pursuit or fulfilment but in patient, interior

endurance, *Viraha* is not weakness here, it is a form of emotional sovereignty that Tamil culture recognizes and honors. Socially, the *thozhi* and other people around the hero and heroine ensures that desire is never purely private, it is always relationally held, carried between people, and given language by those who witness it. What *Kurunthogai* redefines, finally, is not just *Kama* but the very measure of what it means to feel deeply, and it is this redefinition that makes these 401 short poems, composed over two thousand years ago, still feel like they were written this morning.

## Conclusion

Across centuries and civilizations, desire has been sung, theorized, celebrated, and mourned, but rarely has it been understood with the kind of quiet, radical depth that *Kurunthogai* brings to it. This paper has traced how the text moves away from the Sanskrit tradition's outward, declarative, and physically oriented understanding of *Kama*, and arrives at something altogether different, a vision of desire that is universal yet intimate, interior yet expressed through the natural world, and deeply personal yet socially sustained. *Kama* in *Kurunthogai* lives most fully not in union but in separation, not in declaration but in silence, not in the body of the beloved but in the imagination of the one who waits. The *Tinai* system, the anonymity of its speakers, the sovereignty of the *talaivi's* voice, the mediating presence of the *thozhi*, and the mental union that transcends physical distance, all of these together construct a vision of desire that is at once ancient and strikingly contemporary. *Kama* here is not an arrow that strikes from outside; it is a landscape one inhabits, quietly, patiently, and completely. And it is in that quiet inhabitation in the loosened bangle, the pallid forehead, and the lone kite crying on a dry branch that *Kurunthogai* locates the deepest truth about what it means to desire, to feel, and to be human.

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