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Exploring “Rasa Theory” in Nedunalvadai

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ABSTRACT

Bharata’s “Rasa Theory” is a significant contribution to Indian aesthetics. He describes various events and experiences in a person’s life through the concept the rasa (essence or flavor). In every situation, people experience different emotions, and through drama and dance, these emotions are brought to life. Bharata’s theory transports the audience to a state where they forget themselves and become deeply connected to the characters’ emotions. It is suggested that every object has an emotional impact that affects the human mind, showing the relationship between emotions and their effects on individuals. Rooted in a literary context, the Rasa theory has become an important framework in literary theory, linking artistic expression to human experience and grounding it in reality. Bharata’s Rasa theory suggests that art is more than mere entertainment – it allows us to experience the essence of our shared human emotions. The Theory’s deep understanding of emotional dynamics continues to inspire and shape the performing art, demonstrating the timeless wisdom of ancient Indian thought.

This article explores the application of Rasa theory in the Sangam text *Nedunalvadai* (The long good winter wind), a classical Tamil poem belonging to Sangam literature. It examines how the evocation of emotions enhances the poem’s thematic depth, particularly in portraying separation, longing and inner emotional landscapes. Adopting a literary analytical approach, the study investigates how Bharata’s aesthetics framework can be applied to *Nedunalvadai*, thereby deepening the understanding of emotional expression within Sangam poetry.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Emotional Expression, Tamil Poetry, Literary Analysis, Separation (Viraha), Classical Literature

Introduction

Nedunalvadai, written by the famous poet *Nakkirar* during the 2nd or 3rd century A.D., is a masterpiece of the Sangam “Augustan Age.” The title translates to “The Long, Good Winter Wind.” It centers on the Pandya King *Nedum-chezhiyan*, a legendary warrior known for his massive victory at *Talaiyalankanam*. The poem is a study of contrast between the cold, external world of war and the warm, internal world of the palace.



The poem begins with a vivid seventy-two-line description of the biting north wind and the late rains. *Nakkirar* describes a world in physical distress: *cattle are too cold to graze, birds fall from trees, and people huddle around fires for warmth*. Nature itself seems to be shivering, setting a somber and desolate tone.

The scene then shifts to the magnificent city and the interior of the royal palace. We are led into the private bedchamber of the Queen, who is in deep emotional pain. Because the King is away at war, she has abandoned her finery. She wears simple clothes and no jewelry, her state reflecting the "long" and agonizing nature of her wait. Her attendants try desperately to distract her, but their efforts fail because her mind is entirely consumed by the King's absence.

To offer hope, an elderly foster-mother prays to the Goddess of Victory. She uses this moment to describe the King's current activities in the military camp to the Queen. This part of the poem highlights the King's noble character. Even though it is the dead of night—a time when the Queen is most lonely—the King is not resting. Despite being wounded himself, he is walking through the muddy, rain-soaked camp. Accompanied by his general, he visits his injured soldiers one by one, offering them smiles and words of encouragement rather than seeking medical aid for himself.

The poem concludes with a prayer for the King's swift and victorious return. The "long" winter wind represents the Queen's lonely suffering, while it is "good" because it blows during a time when the King is fulfilling his righteous duty (*Dharma*) as a protector. *Nakkirar* thus beautifully balances the *Vipralambha* Sringara (the Queen's longing) with the *Vira Rasa* (the King's heroism), creating a timeless portrait of duty and devotion.

The concept of *Rasa* has the power to transform not only our understanding of art but also our perception of human emotions and interpersonal connections. *Rasa* is a Sanskrit word meaning "essence," and aesthetic experiences." It describes the intense emotional resonance that occurs when a person engages with a work of art – whether through reading or watching. When a person interacts with a creative work, their mind goes through a process that arouses various emotions, causing them to connect deeply with the feeling expressed in the art. These emotions form the core of the artistic experiences, shaping the emotional response of the viewer.

The *Rasa* Theory in *Natyashastra* is one of its most important contributions, and it has been extensively analyzed by scholars for centuries. The famous *rasa* sutra for invoking *rasa* is:

“*vibhava anubhava vyabhichari samyogat rasa nishpattih.*”¹ (Dwivedi 34)

In the context, *vibhava*² refers to the determinants or causes that evoke *bhava* (emotion). At the same time, *anubhava* is the physical manifestation or expression of that *bhava*, which is communicated through *abhinaya*³ (acting or expression). The most essential *vibhava* and *anubhava* are those that bring out the *sthayi bhava* (the principal emotions) – the primary, permanent *bhava* at a given moment. Thus, the *rasa* sutra states that *vibhava anubhava* and *vyabhicharibhava* (the transient emotions) together produce *rasa*. When the determinants and expressions effectively invoke *bhava*, especially the *sthayibhava*, the proper use of *vyabhicharibhavas* enhances it, leading to the emergence of *sattvikabhava* (involuntary emotional reactions) and ultimately the experience of *rasa*. *Vibhava* refers to the cause or stimulus that arouses an

¹ The emotional experience arises from the combination of determining factors, emotional expression, and transitory emotional states.

² *Vibhava*: Factors that cause emotions, often including characters, situations, or objects in a narrative.

³ *Abhinaya*: The art of expression in Indian classical dance and drama, encompassing gestures, facial expressions, and body movements.

emotion (*bhava*) and is divided into *alambana* (central object/person) and *uddipana* (environmental factors). *Anubhava* is the physical manifestation or external expression of the internal emotion, such as gestures or facial expressions. *Vyabhichari* bhavas are the thirty-three transient emotions that support and enhance the dominant *sthayi bhava*.

There are eight *sthayibhava* and corresponding to each of them are eight primary rasas. There are:

| <i>Sthayi Bhava</i> | <i>Rasa</i> |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Rati</i> (love) | <i>Srngara</i> (the erotic) |
| <i>Shoka</i> (grief) | <i>Karuna</i> (compassion) |
| <i>Krodha</i> (wrath) | <i>Raudra</i> (furious) |
| <i>Utsaha</i> (energy) | <i>Vira</i> (heroic) |
| <i>Bhaya</i> (fear) | <i>Bhayanaka</i> (terrible) |
| <i>Hasa</i> (humor) | <i>Hasya</i> (comic) |
| <i>Jugupsa</i> (disgust) | <i>Bibhatsa</i> (loathsome) |
| <i>Vismaya</i> (wonder) | <i>Adbhuta</i> (marvelous) |

Rasa in Nedunalvadai by Nakkirar

Nedunalvadai presents main rasa of life in this poem: *Sringara* (erotic). While other rasas are also present like *Karuna rasa*, *vira rasa*, *bibhatsa* and *bhayanaka*, the main focus is on *sringara rasa*. *Sringara rasa* is further divided into two types: *Vipralambha* (love in separation) and *Sambhoga* (love in union). In this poem *Vipralambha* (love in separation) rasa is the main *angi rasa*⁴ (dominant emotions), while *Karuna*, *Vir* (heroism) and *bhayanaka* (terror) serve as supporting *angarasa*⁵ (subordinate emotions). Rasa has been used in this poem not only to entertain but also to consider deeper emotion and show the situation of separation.

Sringara Rasa in Nedunalvadai

In classical Indian aesthetics, *sringara rasa* is considered the king of all rasas, focusing on the feeling of love and beauty. It can be broadly divided into two parts: *Vipralambha sringara* and *sambhoga sringara*. Both these aspects of romantic love are essential to understand the complete experience of *sringara*, from the pain of longing to the joy of fulfilment. In both *vipralambha* and *sambhoga sringara*, *Alambana* and *Uddipana* play an important role in shaping the emotional landscape.

Vipralambha Sringara (Love in Separation)

Vipralambha Sringara captures the aesthetic essence of love intensified through distance. It centers on the *Sthayi Bhava* of *Rati* (attachment), which remains steadfast despite the physical absence of the beloved. In this state, the heroine experiences a transition of “colors” to “shadows,” where worldly pleasures, like music, fragrances, or moonlight, become painful reminders of her isolation. Her lack of adornment and physical wasting serve as *Anubhavas*, signaling that her beauty is meaningless without her partner’s gaze. Ultimately,

⁴ *Angi rasa*: It is the core feeling that the audience connects with, around which other emotions (known as *vyabhichari rasa*) may revolve.

⁵ *Anga rasa*: the supportive or subsidiary emotions that enhance the primary emotion (or *angi rasa*) within a work of art or performance.

this Rasa elevates the narrative by proving that the psychological bond of love is most profound when tested by the agony of pining.

“Lying on her bed without any makeup,
she was like a sketch on which colors had not
been painted”.

In these poignant lines from *Netunalvatai*, Nakkirar utilizes the metaphor of an unpainted sketch to evoke the essence of *Vipralambha* Sringara (Love in Separation). According to Rasa theory, the Queen’s lack of makeup and adornment serves as a powerful *Anubhava*; a physical manifestation of her internal emotional void. In the absence of her husband, the King, who is her primary *Alambana* Vibhava (the object of her love), the Queen’s world has lost its “color” or vitality.

The “sketch” represents the formal structure of her life, her status, her beauty, and her palace, but without the “paint” of her lover’s presence, she is incomplete and drained of joy. This imagery perfectly captures the *Sthayi Bhava* of *Rati* (attachment) being frustrated by distance. Her state of being “bereft of ornaments” is a traditional signifier in Sangam poetics that the heroine’s beauty has no purpose if it cannot be witnessed by her beloved. By comparing her to a colorless drawing, the poet emphasizes her *Nirveda* (despair) and *Chinta* (anxiety), turning her physical appearance into a canvas of grief.

Supportive rasa

While *Vipralambha* Sringara (love in separation) serves as the primary emotional thread of *Netunalvatai*, the poem’s structural integrity and depth are built upon several Supportive Rasas that provide contrast and grounding.

The most prominent supporting element is *Vira Rasa* (the heroic sentiment), embodied by the Pandya King. Unlike the Queen’s internal world of stillness, the King’s world is one of action and grit. His tireless rounds through the rain-soaked camp to visit his wounded soldiers shift the poem from mere romantic pining to a celebration of Dharma-vira (heroism through duty). This creates a “supportive” tension; the reader’s sympathy for the Queen is balanced by an admiration for the King’s noble sacrifice, making the separation feel necessary rather than accidental.

Complementing this is *Karuna Rasa* (pathos), which *Nakkirar* skillfully spreads across the landscape. The shivering animals and the “closing” of nature due to the biting North wind act as a mirror to the Queen’s sorrow. This environmental pathos elevates the poem from a private domestic drama to a universal struggle against the elements. Finally, *Bhayanaka Rasa* (the sentiment of dread or awe) is subtly evoked through the description of the relentless *Vatai* wind and the dark, flooded midnight camp. Together, these supportive flavors ensure that the poem isn’t just a story of a lonely woman, but a complex tapestry where duty, nature’s fury, and human resilience coexist, ultimately enriching the final aesthetic experience of the work.

Conclusion

The conclusion of *Netunalvatai* lies in the perfect equilibrium between Love (*Akam*) and Duty (*Puram*). Through the masterful application of *Rasa Nispattih*, *Nakkirar* elevates a simple story of separation into a profound exploration of human character. The “Long, Good Winter” serves as the ultimate catalyst, where the *Vipralambha* Sringara of the pining Queen and the *Vira Rasa* of the tireless King meet. By contrasting the chilling external environment with the warmth of royal duty and emotional devotion, the poem demonstrates that true nobility is found in endurance. Ultimately, the work celebrates the harmony of a life lived according to *Dharma*.



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