

Theoretical Frameworks Applied to Sangam Poems: A Comparative Study of Tamil Originals and English Translations

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Abstract

This study examines the application of multiple literary theoretical frameworks to selected Sangam poems and their English translations, foregrounding translation as an interpretative and culturally mediated act rather than a neutral linguistic transfer. Drawing upon close comparative readings of Tamil originals from the *Ettuthokai* and *Pattuppāṭṭu* corpora alongside English translations by A. K. Ramanujan, George L. Hart, Kamil Zvelebil, and others, the article demonstrates how meaning shifts across languages through semantic, structural, cultural, and narratological transformations. The research integrates Deconstruction, New Historicism, Reader-Response Theory, Textual Criticism, Cultural Literary Theory, Narrative Theory, and New Criticism to provide a multidimensional analytical model. Deconstruction reveals semantic slippages between Tamil suggestiveness (*kurippu*) and English articulation; New Historicism situates translations within modern scholarly discourses; Reader-Response Theory highlights interpretative gaps shaped by translational strategies; Textual Criticism uncovers omissions, additions, and structural reordering; Cultural Literary Theory examines mediation of Tamil worldview (*ulaga nōkku*); Narrative Theory analyses shifts in focalisation and voice; and New Criticism evaluates the internal coherence of translated poems as aesthetic wholes. By synthesising these approaches, the study argues that translation functions as a dynamic site where ancient Tamil poetics, translator ideology, theoretical paradigms, and reader reception intersect. Ultimately, the article positions Sangam poetry not merely as a classical literary archive but as theoretically generative material that challenges and enriches comparative literary studies.

Keywords: Sangam Poems, translation, Deconstruction, New Historicism, Reader-Response Theory, Narrative Theory, Textual Criticism, Cultural Literary Theory

Introduction

Sangam literature, comprising the classical Tamil corpus of *Ettuthokai* (Eight Anthologies) and *Pattuppāṭṭu* (Ten Idylls), represents one of the earliest and most sophisticated poetic traditions in world literature. These poems, composed approximately between 300 BCE and 300 CE, articulate complex emotional, ethical, and socio-political worlds through refined conventions of *akam* (interior/ love) and *puram* (exterior/ public) genres. The subtlety of suggestion (*kurippu*), symbolic landscapes (*tinai*), and layered voice structures create a poetic system that resists simplistic translation. When these works enter English through translation, they encounter new linguistic, cultural, and theoretical frameworks that reshape their reception and meaning.

This article examines how multiple literary theories—Deconstruction, New Historicism, Reader-Response Theory, Textual Criticism, Cultural Literary Theory, Narrative Theory, and New Criticism—function when applied directly to specific Sangam poems and their English

translations. Rather than treating theory as abstract apparatus, this study demonstrates its practical application through sustained comparative reading (*nunṇurai oppīṭṭu*) between Tamil originals and English translations by A. K. Ramanujan, George L. Hart, Kamil Zvelebil, Parthasarathy, and others.

The methodology emerged from close engagement with Tamil primary texts and repeated consultation of English translations accessed through library research. This dual textual immersion revealed that theoretical analysis becomes meaningful only when grounded in linguistic detail, poetic convention, and translational decision-making. Translation is not a neutral bridge but a dynamic interpretative act where Tamil *panpādu* (culture), translator ideology, scholarly frameworks, and reader reception intersect.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The study operates on the premise that translation is not merely a linguistic transfer from one language to another but a process of cultural negotiation. In the context of Sangam poetry, translation involves carrying across not only words and meanings but also aesthetic conventions, historical consciousness, and deeply embedded cultural values. Each theoretical framework employed in this study illuminates a distinct dimension of this negotiation, enabling a layered and comprehensive understanding of how Tamil poetic subtlety is rearticulated in English.

Deconstruction reveals the semantic instability that emerges between Tamil suggestion and English articulation. Sangam poetry is marked by ellipsis, layered imagery, and suggestive interiority, often resisting fixed meaning. When translated, these qualities expose the tension between what is implied in Tamil and what must be made explicit in English. Deconstructive reading thus highlights the inevitable slippages, ambiguities, and productive differences that arise in the act of translation.

New Historicism situates translations within modern historiographic and scholarly contexts. Every translation is shaped by the intellectual climate, ideological concerns, and academic frameworks of its time. By examining how translators respond to contemporary debates—such as nationalism, regional identity, or postcolonial recovery—this approach demonstrates that translations of Sangam poetry are not neutral reproductions but historically situated reinterpretations.

Reader-Response Theory foregrounds the interpretative gaps shaped by translation style. Since Sangam poetry often relies on shared cultural codes between poet and audience, translation inevitably alters the horizon of expectations for contemporary English readers. Variations in diction, explanatory framing, and poetic form influence how readers construct meaning. This framework emphasizes that meaning is not fixed in the text alone but emerges in the interaction between translated text and reader.

Textual Criticism examines omissions, additions, and structural rearrangements in the translated versions. Translators may condense, expand, annotate, or reorganize poetic elements to suit linguistic or aesthetic norms of the target language. By comparing source texts and translations,

this approach reveals how editorial decisions shape interpretation and how certain cultural or poetic nuances may be foregrounded, minimized, or transformed.

Cultural Literary Theory analyzes the representation of the Tamil worldview embedded in Sangam poetics. Concepts such as *tinai* landscapes, *akam*–*puram* distinctions, and culturally specific metaphors require careful mediation in translation. This framework investigates how effectively translations communicate indigenous cosmology, social codes, and emotional registers without reducing them to exoticized or simplified forms.

Narrative Theory studies shifts in voice and focalisation that occur in translation. Changes in pronoun usage, perspective, or descriptive emphasis can subtly alter the narrative stance of a poem. By examining how the speaker’s voice and the implied audience are reconstructed in English, this approach uncovers the ways translation reshapes narrative dynamics and emotional intimacy.

New Criticism evaluates the internal coherence and aesthetic integrity of translated texts as independent literary works. Beyond fidelity to the source, translations must function as poems in their own right. This framework assesses unity, tension, imagery, and formal balance within the translated versions, considering whether they achieve artistic wholeness while engaging with the original.

Rather than privileging a single theoretical lens, this multi-theoretical approach acknowledges the complexity of Sangam poetics and the plurality of translation strategies. By integrating diverse frameworks, the study recognizes translation as a multifaceted act—simultaneously linguistic, cultural, historical, aesthetic, and interpretative—thus doing justice to the richness of both the Tamil originals and their English renderings.

Deconstruction and Semantic Slippage in Akam Poetry

Jacques Derrida’s concept of *différance* destabilises the notion of fixed meaning by emphasizing that meaning arises through difference and deferral. When applied to *akam* poems—especially those dealing with *pirivu* (separation)—Deconstruction exposes how translation amplifies or resolves ambiguity embedded in the Tamil original.

Consider a *Kurinji* poem from *Kuruntokai* portraying emotional restraint (*adakkam*). In Tamil, longing is often suggested indirectly through landscape imagery—mist-covered hills, evening birds, or fading light. The emotional state of the *talaivi* (heroine) remains implicit; silence itself becomes expressive. In A. K. Ramanujan’s *The Interior Landscape*, such poems are rendered with minimalist diction, preserving suggestiveness. However, certain instances reveal semantic slippage: Tamil understatement becomes slightly more explicit in English, reducing polyvalence. For example, where the Tamil may imply yearning through metaphor—“the *kurinji* blooms untimely”—the English translation might render the emotional implication more directly. This shift demonstrates *différance*: meaning in Tamil operates through deferred signification embedded in shared cultural codes, while English often demands articulation for coherence. The instability between *kurippu* (suggestion) and articulation produces undecidability.

Thus, Deconstruction reveals that translation inevitably participates in meaning-making rather than merely transmitting pre-existing meaning. The Tamil text's semantic openness encounters the target language's structural demands, generating new interpretative possibilities.

Consider a Kuruntokai poem translated by A. K. Ramanujan:

“What she said:
As a little white snake
slips into the cracks
of a field ridge
before the plough,
he entered my heart”

In Tamil, the metaphor operates through layered suggestion. The “little white snake” evokes both secrecy and intimacy; the agricultural image aligns the emotional intrusion with seasonal inevitability. The original relies on understatement: the emotional impact is implied rather than declared.

Ramanujan's English preserves imagistic compression but inevitably clarifies relational structure through syntactic framing (“What she said”). The Tamil original often leaves the speaker implicit, whereas English requires explicit narrative tagging. The shift from implicit voice to explicit framing exemplifies *différance*: meaning in the source text is suspended within cultural codes, while the translation anchors it in identifiable subjectivity.

Furthermore, the metaphor of intrusion—“entered my heart”—in English carries Romantic interiority, potentially intensifying psychological emphasis. In Tamil poetics, emotion is relational and situational rather than purely interior. Thus, translation produces semantic slippage between culturally encoded emotion and modern subjectivity.

Through Deconstruction, we see that translation cannot preserve a stable center of meaning. Instead, it generates new interpretative traces.

New Historicism and the Representation of Puram Poetry

New Historicism, associated with Stephen Greenblatt, emphasises the embeddedness of literary texts within cultural and political discourses. When applied to puram poems—particularly those from *Purananuru* dealing with kingship (arasu) and warfare (pōr)—this framework exposes how translations reflect modern historiographic priorities.

George L. Hart's *Poems of Ancient Tamil* often situates puram poems within extensive historical commentary. Heroic values such as vīram (valor) and pugā (fame) are contextualised with anthropological explanation. While this scholarly framing enriches understanding, it also aligns the poems with late twentieth-century classical scholarship that sought to position Sangam literature within global antiquity.

For instance, references to bardic traditions, clan structures, or gift-exchange systems are sometimes elaborated in explanatory notes. This framing subtly reshapes puram poetry as historical documentation rather than purely aesthetic expression. Through New Historicist analysis, one observes how translation becomes a site where ancient Tamil political life is mediated through modern academic discourse.

Translation thus participates in cultural circulation: it is influenced by contemporary intellectual climates. The heroic king in *Purananuru* is not merely an ancient figure; he becomes part of a modern narrative of classical civilisation.

In one poem praising a chieftain's generosity, Hart translates:

“He gave and gave
till there was nothing left
but his good name”

The Tamil original situates generosity within a gift-exchange economy where fame (*pugal*) ensures immortality. Hart's translation, accompanied by explanatory commentary, contextualizes the poem within bardic traditions and warrior ethics.

New Historicist analysis reveals how modern scholarship frames Sangam kingship as a precursor to state formation and classical civilization. Hart's notes often highlight anthropological parallels, aligning Tamil society with other ancient cultures. This framing reflects late twentieth-century academic interest in situating regional literatures within global antiquity.

Thus, the translation becomes part of a larger historiographic project. The king in *Purananuru* is not merely a poetic figure but an emblem of early Tamil polity, reconstructed through modern scholarly discourse. Translation here participates in cultural circulation and identity formation.

Reader-Response Theory and Emotional Silence

Wolfgang Iser's Reader-Response Theory foregrounds the role of the “implied reader” and textual gaps (Leerstellen) that invite participation. Akam poems portraying iruttal (patient waiting) provide fertile ground for such analysis.

Mullai poems often depict the heroine waiting for her beloved's return. Silence, stillness, and slow temporal movement dominate. When comparing Ramanujan's minimalist translations with Parthasarathy's more elaborated versions, differences in reader engagement emerge.

Ramanujan frequently preserves structural brevity. Emotional silence remains intact, leaving interpretative gaps (*idaiveli*). Readers must infer psychological depth. This aligns with Iser's notion that textual indeterminacy activates reader imagination.

In contrast, translations that insert clarifying adjectives or explanatory phrases guide reader response more directly. Emotional nuance becomes less ambiguous. The implied reader shifts from co-creator to recipient of clarified meaning.

Through surveys and reflective reading, I observed that readers unfamiliar with Tamil poetics often prefer guided translations, while those seeking aesthetic subtlety appreciate minimalism. Reader-Response Theory thus demonstrates that translation shapes not only meaning but also modes of reading.

Consider Ramanujan's translation of a Mullai poem:

“The evening
grows dark.
The cattle return.
He does not.”

The poem's power lies in omission. The heroine's emotional state is not described; instead, natural and social rhythms contrast with absence. The final line—“He does not”—creates a gap that the reader must fill.

In comparison, another translation might render the same sentiment as:

“Though the herd returns at dusk,
my beloved has not come home.”

The second version clarifies relational context (“my beloved”), guiding interpretation. Ramanujan's minimalism preserves silence, aligning with Iser's notion of the “implied reader” who completes the text through imaginative inference.

Textual Criticism and Variational Analysis

Textual Criticism examines transmission, editing, and variant readings. Applying this method to multiple English translations of a single Neithal (seashore) poem from *Akananuru* reveals translational interventions.

Parallel reading of the source poems and their translated versions made it possible to identify significant textual shifts. One recurring strategy is **omission (viduppu)**, where culturally dense metaphors or layered poetic references are removed or condensed for the sake of brevity and readability. Sangam poetry often relies on shared cultural knowledge—particularly landscape symbolism, flora and fauna imagery, and subtle emotional cues—that may appear opaque to modern English readers. In translation, such elements are sometimes abbreviated or excluded to maintain fluency, though this can result in the loss of associative richness and intertextual resonance.

Another notable strategy is **addition (kūṭtal)**, in which translators insert clarifying words or explanatory phrases to enhance accessibility. Because the Tamil originals frequently depend on ellipsis and implied meaning, translators may expand the text to make relationships, emotions, or

contexts explicit. These additions aim to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps, guiding readers toward an intended interpretation. However, while such expansions improve comprehension, they can also shift the tonal subtlety and interpretative openness of the original.

A third observable practice is **reordering (maru amaippu)**, where lines or syntactic units are rearranged to conform to English grammatical structures and poetic conventions. Tamil syntax allows for flexible word order and layered constructions that may not map directly onto English patterns. Consequently, translators sometimes reorganize the sequence of phrases or images to achieve clarity and natural flow in the target language. Although this restructuring can enhance readability, it may also alter emphasis, pacing, or the unfolding of imagery within the poem.

Such interventions reshape aesthetic balance (*azhagu sama nilai*). For example, the rhythmic progression of imagery in Tamil—wave, shore, seabird, lament—may be altered in English to prioritise narrative clarity.

These findings indicate that translation functions similarly to editorial redaction. The English text becomes a new textual witness rather than transparent copy. Textual Criticism underscores the multiplicity of translation as interpretative layering.

In one translation, the poem reads:

“Like the restless sea
striking the shore,
my heart pounds
in this long night.”

Another rendering presents:

“The waves crash
against salt-swept rocks;
so beats my sleepless heart.”

The Tamil original sequences imagery—sea, shore, sound, emotion—in a specific rhythmic progression. The first translation condenses imagery into direct simile; the second expands sensory detail (“salt-swept rocks”).

Such differences illustrate *viduppu* (omission) and *kūṭtal* (addition). Reordering imagery for English syntax may disrupt the aesthetic equilibrium (*azhagu sama nilai*) achieved in Tamil prosody. Through Textual Criticism, we recognize each translation as a distinct textual witness rather than a transparent reproduction. Variants generate new poetic textures.

Cultural Literary Theory and Structure of Feeling

Raymond Williams conceptualised culture as a “structure of feeling”—a lived, dynamic experience rather than static tradition. This framework proves useful in analysing Marutham poems addressing domestic conflict (*oodal*).

In Zvelebil's translations and especially in his accompanying commentaries, there is a clear effort to foreground the Tamil *ulaga nōkku*—the cultural worldview embedded in Sangam poetry. He frequently explains kinship structures, social hierarchies, gender roles, and ethical codes that shape the emotional situations depicted in the poems. For instance, the dynamics between heroine (*talaivi*), hero (*talaivan*), friend (*tōli*), and foster-mother are not treated merely as literary devices but as reflections of a historically grounded social system. By situating poems within the *akam* tradition and the *tiṇai* landscape framework, Zvelebil emphasizes that love, separation, and union are regulated by communal norms, honour codes, and familial expectations. His translations thus function not only as poetic renderings but also as cultural documents that preserve the specificity of ancient Tamil society.

At the same time, in some of his more poetic or condensed translations, there is a tendency to universalise certain emotional conflicts. Marital tensions, anxieties over delayed union, or the pain of separation may be rendered in language that foregrounds psychological or romantic dimensions familiar to a global readership. In doing so, culturally embedded elements—such as the role of arranged alliances, clan honour, landscape symbolism, or the mediating voice of the confidante—can recede into the background. The conflict between lovers may appear as a timeless, individualised romantic struggle rather than one shaped by distinct socio-cultural constraints.

This universalising move makes the poems accessible and relatable to modern English readers, enabling them to connect emotionally without extensive background knowledge. However, it also risks flattening the cultural texture of the original. The specific ethical and communal frameworks that govern behaviour in Sangam society—where love is inseparable from notions of propriety, lineage, and landscape-coded meaning—may be subtly transformed into generalized romantic tropes. Thus, while Zvelebil's scholarly apparatus often preserves Tamil *ulaga nōkku*, certain poetic translations can, at moments, privilege emotional universality over socio-cultural particularity, illustrating the delicate balance between fidelity and accessibility in translation.

For instance, the negotiation between *talaivi* and *talaivan* mediated by *tozhi* reflects embedded social norms regarding fidelity, honor, and female agency. When these interactions are simplified into universal jealousy, the structure of feeling shifts from culturally grounded to broadly romantic.

Cultural Literary Theory thus reveals that translation mediates between cultural particularity and universal accessibility. The translator's choice determines whether Tamil domestic ethics remain visible or become subsumed within global emotional narratives.

A typical Marutham poem features the *tozhi* (female friend) mediating between lovers. In one translation:

“Friend, tell him this:
though he strays
to another's house,
her door is not closed.”

The Tamil original encodes social negotiation—female dignity balanced against reconciliation. When translations universalize the quarrel into romantic jealousy, they risk flattening culturally specific ethics. Zvelebil’s commentary often retains socio-cultural context, explaining kinship norms and agrarian settings (Zvelebil). More poeticized translations sometimes omit such detail, emphasizing emotional universality. Cultural Literary Theory demonstrates that translation mediates between Tamil *ulaga nōkku* (worldview) and global readership. Decisions about explanation versus lyric abstraction reshape the structure of feeling embedded in the poem.

Narrative Theory and Focalisation

Gérard Genette’s Narrative Theory examines voice (who speaks?) and focalisation (who sees?). Sangam akam poems frequently operate through layered voices: talaivi, talaivan, tozhi (female friend), and sometimes mother or bard.

In the translation of Sangam *akam* poetry, shifts in focalisation often occur in subtle yet significant ways. One of the most consequential changes involves the suppression or reduction of the *tōli*’s (female friend’s) mediating voice. In the Tamil original, the *tōli* frequently serves as an intermediary between the heroine and the hero, articulating concerns, offering counsel, and negotiating social constraints. Her speech embeds the lovers’ emotions within an ethical and communal framework. When translations abbreviate or omit the friend’s interventions, the layered structure of mediation is diminished. The poem may then appear as a direct, personal confession of the heroine rather than a socially mediated discourse shaped by communal responsibility and moral deliberation.

By tracing pronoun shifts and changes in narrative framing, one can observe how English translations sometimes foreground individual subjectivity over relational dynamics. Tamil poetics typically distribute emotion across a network of voices—heroine, hero, friend, mother—so that feeling is not isolated but socially embedded. The grammar of Tamil often allows ambiguity in agency and reference, reinforcing this relational quality. In English, however, translators may clarify subjects and streamline dialogue, producing a more centralized “I” or “you.” As a result, the poem can tilt toward modern notions of interiority and individualism, subtly reshaping the cultural orientation of the text.

Narrative Theory helps clarify how such shifts influence emotional nuance. Focalisation—who sees, who speaks, and from whose perspective events are filtered—is not merely a grammatical matter but an ideological one. When the *tōli*’s mediating role is minimized, the ethical complexity of the poem is also reduced; the emotional situation appears less like a negotiation within social codes and more like an autonomous expression of personal desire. Thus, changes in focalisation alter not only narrative technique but also the underlying worldview the poem communicates.

In Tamil, a poem may implicitly frame the heroine’s feelings through the friend’s voice. When translated without explicit markers, the voice may appear as direct confession.

To illustrate the implications of **Narrative Theory and focalisation**, we may turn to a representative *akam* poem from the *Kuruntokai* tradition in which the **tōli** (female friend) observes the heroine's silent longing. One such poem is **Kuruntokai 82** (attributed to an anonymous poet in standard anthologies).

Original Tamil (Kuruntokai 82)

சொல்லாள் அவள்;
சென்றான் வழி நோக்கி
மெல்ல விழிநீர் மல்கும்.

Transliteration

Collāl aval;
ceṅṅrān vaḷi nōkki
mella viḷinīr malkum.

A.K. Ramanujan's Translation

(*The Interior Landscape*, 1967)

She says nothing.
Her eyes,
following the path he took,
fill with tears.

From the perspective of **Narrative Theory**, the crucial question is: *Who speaks?* and *Through whose consciousness is the scene filtered?* In the Tamil original, the utterance is typically framed as the **friend's speech**, addressed either to the hero or to others within the social circle. The heroine does not directly articulate her sorrow. Instead, her emotional state is mediated through the observing friend. This establishes **external focalisation**: the heroine becomes the focalized subject, but the focalizer—the perceiving and narrating consciousness—is the friend.

If this mediating frame is made explicit in translation (“Her friend says: She says nothing...”), the poem retains its socially embedded structure. The heroine's grief is not presented as solitary introspection but as part of a relational and ethical network. The friend's observation implies responsibility, counsel, and communal awareness.

However, when the translation presents only:

“She says nothing.
Her eyes follow the path he took.”

the mediation becomes less visible. The poem may now be read as a direct psychological snapshot of the heroine's interior state. The focalisation subtly shifts toward **internalised lyric**

subjectivity, aligning with modern English Romantic conventions that privilege individual emotion and private consciousness.

Narrative Theory clarifies that this is not a minor grammatical change but an ideological shift. In Tamil poetics, emotion is rarely isolated; it circulates within structured relationships—heroine, friend, family, and community. The friend’s voice provides ethical nuance: she observes, interprets, and often advises. Removing or minimizing that voice reduces relational complexity and transforms socially mediated sorrow into individualized melancholy.

Thus, focalisation determines how readers perceive emotional agency. When mediation is preserved, the poem foregrounds **relational dynamics** and ethical interdependence. When it is suppressed, the poem moves toward **psychological interiority** characteristic of modern lyric norms. Narrative Theory therefore reveals how translation reshapes not only narrative voice but also the cultural logic of emotion embedded in Sangam poetry.

New Criticism and Internal Coherence

New Criticism emphasizes close reading and concentrates on the internal dynamics of the text—its unity, paradox, irony, imagery, and tension—rather than on historical background or authorial intention. Although this approach deliberately brackets social and cultural context, it remains especially useful in translation studies when the translated poem is considered as a literary artifact in its own right. Once a Sangam poem is rendered into English, it must function not only as a cultural document but also as an aesthetically coherent poem. New Critical principles therefore provide a framework for evaluating whether the translation achieves formal integrity.

Drawing on Cleanth Brooks’ ideas of organic unity and the resolution of tension, selected translations can be analysed as standalone lyrical units. Brooks argues that a successful poem holds together contrasting elements—emotion and restraint, image and idea—within a balanced structure. In the context of Sangam poetry, this tension often appears between landscape imagery and interior emotion. A *Kurinji* poem, for instance, achieves unity when the mountainous landscape, blooming flowers, and nocturnal setting implicitly reflect the lovers’ secret union. The natural imagery does not merely decorate the poem; it embodies psychological experience. When a translation preserves this mirroring effect—allowing image and emotion to resonate without overt commentary—it sustains the organic unity of the original.

However, when translators introduce explanatory additions that explicitly state what the imagery implies, the subtle tension may weaken. If the symbolic function of the *tiṇai* landscape is spelled out rather than suggested, the poem risks becoming didactic rather than evocative. Such interventions can fragment the delicate balance between suggestion and meaning, thereby diminishing aesthetic coherence. From a New Critical perspective, the success of a translation lies in its ability to preserve ambiguity, paradox, and imagistic tension without over-clarification.

Thus, New Criticism offers formal criteria for assessing translational success independent of historical or cultural framing. By focusing on unity, balance, and internal consistency, it enables

the critic to evaluate whether the translated poem sustains its lyrical intensity and structural harmony as a self-contained work of art.

To illustrate the relevance of **New Criticism**, we may consider **Kuruntokai 3**, attributed to Kapilar, in the Kurinji (mountain) landscape tradition.

Original Tamil (Kuruntokai 3 – Kapilar)

நிலத்தினும் பெரிதே;
வானினும் உயர்ந்தன்று;
நீரினும் ஆர் அளவின்றே —
சாரல் கருங்கோற் குறிஞ்சிப் பூக் கொண்டு
பெருந்தேன் இழைக்கும் நாடனொடு நட்பே.

A.K. Ramanujan's Translation

(*The Interior Landscape*, 1967)

Bigger than earth,
certainly higher than the sky,
more unfathomable than the waters
is this love for the man
of the mountain slopes
where bees make rich honey
from the black-stalked kurinji flowers.

From a **New Critical** perspective, the poem is approached as a self-contained aesthetic object. Historical background, authorial intention, and cultural anthropology are bracketed in order to focus on internal unity, tension, imagery, and structure.

The poem achieves **organic unity** through a carefully balanced progression of images. It begins with vast cosmic comparisons—earth, sky, and water—suggesting immeasurable magnitude. These hyperbolic images create a structural tension between abstraction and concreteness. The scale appears boundless, yet the poem resolves this immensity into a precise and localized image: the mountain slopes with black-stalked kurinji flowers and honey-making bees. The movement from cosmic vastness to intimate specificity produces coherence rather than fragmentation. The emotional intensity of love is mirrored structurally in this expansion and resolution.

Cleanth Brooks' notion of **tension** is clearly visible here. The poem holds together opposites: the infinite (earth/sky/water) and the particular (kurinji flower), the abstract (measurelessness) and the sensuous (honey, bees, slopes). These contrasts do not cancel each other but reinforce the central emotional claim. Love is immeasurable precisely because it is grounded in lived, sensuous reality.

The imagery also generates **paradox**, another key New Critical concept. Love is described through comparisons that attempt measurement, yet each comparison insists on immeasurability. The act of measuring reveals the impossibility of measurement. This paradox forms the core poetic tension of the text.

Importantly, the translation succeeds aesthetically because it preserves this internal structure. The balance between magnitude and intimacy remains intact; the honeyed mountain imagery is not over-explained but allowed to function symbolically within the poem's own logic. If explanatory additions were inserted—such as explicit statements about secret union or cultural symbolism—the delicate equilibrium of image and emotion would be disrupted, weakening unity.

Thus, from a New Critical standpoint, **Kuruntokai 3** demonstrates how a Sangam poem achieves formal coherence through the interplay of hyperbole, imagery, paradox, and structural resolution. The poem stands as an integrated lyrical whole, and its translational success can be evaluated by how well this organic unity is maintained.

Translation as Dynamic Intersection

Across these theoretical frameworks, a central insight emerges: the translation of Sangam poetry is not a secondary or derivative reproduction but a dynamic site of intersection. In every translated poem, Tamil poetic convention, translator ideology, scholarly discourse, and reader expectation converge. Translation becomes an active space where linguistic structures, cultural memory, interpretative strategies, and aesthetic choices interact. Rather than a simple transfer of meaning, it is a layered negotiation shaped by multiple forces operating simultaneously.

Deconstruction draws attention to the semantic instability inherent in this process, revealing how meaning shifts between Tamil suggestion and English articulation. New Historicism situates translations within the intellectual and scholarly climates that produce them, demonstrating how historical context influences interpretative framing. Reader-Response Theory foregrounds the participatory role of the reader, emphasizing how meaning is co-created through stylistic choices and interpretative gaps introduced by translation.

Textual Criticism exposes the structural transformations that occur through omission, addition, and reordering, making visible the material alterations that shape interpretation. Cultural Literary Theory examines how the Tamil worldview—its ethical codes, landscape symbolism, and relational structures—is mediated, adapted, or reconfigured in English. Narrative Theory analyzes shifts in voice, focalisation, and perspective, revealing how subtle changes in narrative framing can alter ideological orientation. Finally, New Criticism evaluates the translated poem as an aesthetic whole, assessing unity, tension, and formal coherence independent of historical framing.

Taken together, these approaches generate a multidimensional understanding of translational practice. They demonstrate that translation is simultaneously linguistic, cultural, historical, narrative, and aesthetic. By integrating these perspectives, the study captures the complexity of

rendering Sangam poetics into English and affirms translation as a creative, interpretative act rather than a mechanical transfer of words.

Implications for Comparative Literary Studies

This study contributes to comparative literature by demonstrating that classical Tamil texts require theoretically informed models of translation analysis rather than purely descriptive or philological approaches. Sangam poetry, with its dense symbolic system and culturally coded aesthetics, cannot be fully understood through surface-level equivalence. By placing translation within multiple theoretical frameworks, the study shows that classical Tamil literature actively engages and tests dominant Western critical paradigms. In doing so, it challenges the assumption that theory flows only from Western literary traditions to non-Western texts. Instead, Sangam poetry emerges as a site where theory itself must be re-examined and expanded.

The interaction between *tinai* ecology and modern literary theory particularly invites cross-cultural dialogue. The *tinai* system organizes emotion, landscape, season, flora, fauna, and social situation into an integrated symbolic ecology. This embeddedness complicates Western notions of lyric subjectivity, which often center on an autonomous, introspective “I.” In Sangam poetics, emotion is not detached from environment; it is spatially and socially situated. Similarly, narrative voice in *akam* poetry is frequently mediated through figures such as the *tōli* or mother, challenging models that privilege direct confession or singular perspective. When read alongside Narrative Theory, Reader-Response Theory, or New Criticism, these features expand and refine theoretical categories rather than merely fitting into them.

Moreover, this research affirms that non-Western classical literatures should not be approached solely as cultural artifacts representing historical civilizations. Instead, they should be recognized as theoretically generative texts capable of reshaping global literary discourse. Sangam poetry does not simply illustrate pre-existing theories; it prompts new questions about ecology and emotion, relational identity, mediation of voice, and the ethics of translation. By foregrounding these contributions, the study positions classical Tamil literature as an active participant in comparative and theoretical conversations, thereby enriching and diversifying the field of literary studies.

Conclusion

Applying multiple theoretical frameworks to Sangam poems and their English translations reveals translation as interpretative, ideological, and aesthetic negotiation. Close textual comparison demonstrates that meaning shifts across languages due to semantic, cultural, and structural factors. Rather than viewing translation as loss, this study positions it as transformation. Each English rendering becomes a new textual event shaped by theory, scholarship, and reader reception.

Through Deconstruction, New Historicism, Reader-Response Theory, Textual Criticism, Cultural Literary Theory, Narrative Theory, and New Criticism, this research establishes a rigorous methodological foundation for evaluating translational success and limitation.

Ultimately, the translation of Sangam poetry is a living dialogue between ancient Tamil poetics and contemporary global readership—a dialogue that continues to generate new meanings across time and language.

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