

The Philosophy of Love in Thirukkural: An Analytical Exploration

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Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of love in the Thirukkural, a classical Tamil work composed by Thiruvalluvar (3rd century BCE – 5th century CE), particularly its third volume Inbam consisting of 25 chapters on romantic love. The analysis shows that love is treated very delicately and in a complex manner in Thirukkural, where it is seen as a transformative power that is radical in its action on human consciousness, identity and embodied experience. The book examines the stages of the process of loving from its beginning to its end—from attraction to separation, to union—systematically, creating a full-fledged philosophy of the process of love that explores the dialectics of presence and absence, and the role of memory and imagination, as well as the embodiedness of desire and the ethical implications of vulnerability and fidelity. Unlike didactic or lyrical pieces, Thirukkural brings together in a remarkable way analytical sharpness and poetic imagery, relating love as a whole phenomenon, involving the body and mind, the individual and the social, the temporal and the eternal. This paper shows how Thirukkural, dialogued with the western philosophical systems ranging from Plato to psychoanalysis and modern debates in philosophy of emotion, feminist theory, and phenomenology, is relevant, yet has a balanced point of view that celebrates love's universality and ineffability while dealing squarely with the complexities and challenges of love.

Keywords: Consciousness, Experience, Dimensions, Psychoanalysis, Thirukkural.

Introduction

Thirukkural is one of the most sacred texts of Tamil literature and universal ethics of the Tamil people, written by the Tamil poet-philosopher Thiruvalluvar sometime between 3rd century BCE to 5th century CE. It is a masterpiece of 1,330 couplets (kurals) arranged in 133 chapters and comprises three main sections – Aram (virtue/righteousness), Porul (wealth/polity) and Inbam (love/pleasure). The third section, comprising chapters 109-133, presents a profound and nuanced philosophy of love that transcends cultural boundaries while remaining deeply rooted in Tamil literary tradition. What distinguishes Thirukkural's treatment of love from other classical texts is its systematic approach to exploring both the psychological and experiential dimensions of romantic love with remarkable

sophistication. Unlike purely didactic texts that prescribe moral behavior, or purely lyrical texts that celebrate emotion without structure, Thirukkural achieves a unique synthesis: it anatomizes love with scientific precision while preserving its ineffable mystical quality.

The Structure and Context of the Love Section

The Inbam section is made up of 25 chapters (250 couplets), which record the entire process of romantic love from first attraction to consummation and the emotional states which accompany it. The voice of the lovers—hero (thalaivar) and heroine (thalaivi) and their confidantes—is totally different from that of the first two sections which speak in the moralist's voice. The chapters follow a well-planned order:

1. These are seen pre-union stages; recognition of beauty, desire, declaration of love and joy of mutual affection.
2. Separation and longing: The pain of being separated, the pain of being lonely, dreams and visions
3. Physical and emotional symptoms: Pallor, tears, sleeplessness and loss of composure.
4. Reunion and fulfillment: Resolution.

In keeping with the tradition of classical Tamil akam (interior) poetry, this is divided into particular landscapes (tinai) and situations (turai) of love poetry. Thiruvalluvar's brilliance is, however, in elevating these mundane components to a philosophical construct which discusses the ontological and epistemological aspects of love.

Love as a Transformative Experience

The philosophy of love in Thirukkural is centered on the idea that love is a powerful force that can change a person's life and mindset. The Thirukkural philosophy of love is primarily about the transformative power of love on changing human consciousness and identity. Thiruvalluvar does not simply describe or depict love as feeling or wanting, but as an experience that alters the lover's perceptual and cognitive structure. Take this example of a couplet from the chapter on Recognition of Signs (Chapter 110):

“The eyes that have seen the object of desire
Cannot bear to look at anything else.”

It's a seemingly simple statement with significant philosophical undertones. In Thiruvalluvar's conception, love refocuses the whole apparatus of the lover's perception. The beloved becomes the only real reality, against which all other experiences are judged and found lacking. This is not simply infatuation or a passing fancy, but a “revaluation of values” a “revaluation of the beloved,” a change in epistemological perspective which we can call a “revaluation of the lover's universe. The power of love is that of the transformative; it goes beyond perception, it goes into the very sense of being. In the chapter The Agony of Separation (Chapter 119), Thiruvalluvar says:

“Even when the beloved is present, the heart goes seeking
As if the loved one were absent.”

The counterintuitive paradox of this declaration made a statement of the power of love to transcend the self. The lover's identity merges with the beloved so completely, that he or she cannot be satisfied with being physically present with the beloved without being in the beloved. The self strives to overcome its own limitations and to become the other; both the mystical and the contemporary psychoanalytic viewpoints on love share this thread.

The Phenomenology of Desire

Thirukkural provides a very precise phenomenology of desire; it describes the physical, emotional and mental sensations of love in a very precise way. However this cataloguing is not simply descriptive, but also illuminative of the nature of human consciousness and embodiment. The author acknowledges that love is not just an idea or thought but a very physical action. There are several chapters devoted to physical symptoms, such as pallor (Chapter 120), tears (Chapter 121), emaciation (Chapter 123), and loss of beauty (Chapter 124). Pallor is described in the chapter above.

“The pallor that appears when lovers part
Shows the depth of their love to all the world.”

This focus on embodiment calls into question any dualism of mind and body. In Thiruvalluvar, the body is not just a vessel of the soul or mind, but a part of the human experience and shares in the phenomenon of love. The suffering of the body is not another anguish but the anguish made visible and material. In addition, these physical aspects communicate. They turn invisible feelings of love into the visible by externalizing their inside feelings. It implies a view of people as basically social and interpretive beings, whose inner life is communicated through bodily gestures which can be read and understood by others.

The Dialectics of Presence and Absence

A very advanced element of the philosophy of love in Thirukkural is the concept of the presence and absence, union and separation. Thiruvalluvar does not see separation as an impediment to be overcome, but as a part of the experience of love itself. The experience of separation is discussed at length in four chapters: “Lamenting the Affliction” (Chapter 115), “Solitary Suffering” (Chapter 118), “The Agony of Separation” (Chapter 119), and “Speaking to the Heart” (Chapter 122). The comprehensive treatment implies that separation is not an unfortunate break in love but a part of it. Solitary suffering is the theme of this chapter,

“The pain of the fire is only where it burns
But the pain of love pervades the entire body.”

The closer that the lover gets to the beloved, the more aware he becomes of her and the more attached. The idealized is brought even more alive to consciousness in absence, through memory, imagination and desire. This riddle, where absence makes presence more vivid, illustrates the temporal aspect of love. Love is not just found in the here and now, but it also lives in the past in memory and the future in anticipation. Moreover, the separation test is a proof of the authenticity of love. Without the absence of the beloved, it is enjoyed by all, but its absence is what makes it true love. Separation then becomes a time of testing, a crucible in which love is distinguished from simply getting used to another person or person’s lifestyle.

Dreams, Memory, and the Imagination

In Thirukkural, dreams, memory, and imagination are given much attention in the experience of love. Chapter 118 (“Dreams”) treats the special way in which the beloved is seen by the lover in the dream:

“Though the body lies here sleeping
The soul has gone to dwell with the beloved.”

This couplet seems to provide an intriguing explanation for how the mind can maintain agency and intentionality while asleep. The dreams are not random or meaningless, but they are the soul’s struggles with the physical separation and coming together with the loved one. This foreshadows modern psychoanalytic theories of dreams as wish-fulfillment, but with an important distinction: For Thiruvalluvar, dreams are not simply a substitute for reality, but are indeed real experiences.

Memory also is important to maintain love in time and distance. The lover constantly thinks of the moments of sameness and dwells on them, dissecting and enjoying them, and suffering from the recollection of them. Memory serves a way of making the beloved present in their absence, but also of the painful lack of presence in the past and present. Imagination enriches what memory has done: “Imagination opens up a future, a future in which the lover can look forward to a meeting, a meeting that is already in his mind; imagination builds scenarios for a meeting to come: a meeting that is already in his imagination. Memory and imagination allow love to reach beyond the boundaries of the here and now, and they can span through time. This is why time is a necessary condition of love: Love that was never experienced before, nor would be known to exist in the future, is not really love.

The Ethics of Love

The Inbam section seems to be totally bereft of the ethics of the first two sections of Thirukkural, but a careful reading shows that there is an implicit ethics of love that permeates the chapters of this section as well. It is an ethics that focuses on some basic principles: fidelity, vulnerability, authenticity and the acknowledgment of the beloved’s autonomy. In Thirukkural fidelity is not just in the form of external conduct (sexual fidelity) but orientation of consciousness towards the beloved. The eyes of the lover are not able to gaze at anything else; the heart is always searching for the beloved; even in sleep the soul searches for the side of the beloved. This complete surrender is an ethical dedication which influences the lover’s life in all its dimensions. It is also a great vulnerability that is needed for love. The lover is required to reveal his/her self, to risk rejection and suffering, to let another become the focus of his/her emotional life. Thiruvalluvar’s cataloguing of the pains of love shows that suffering is not an incidental but an integral part of love. Love means to be vulnerable, to let someone else hurt you. The ethics of love in Thirukkural is no exception to authenticity as well. The physical symptoms of love can only be faked or hidden: Pallor, tears, emaciation. They represent the body’s truthful testimony to the soul’s condition. This means that the truth of love abhors falsehood, and insists on sincerity. Lastly, the total devotion of the lover in Thirukkural is complemented by the awareness of an independent subjectivity with their own interiority and agency in the beloved. The beloved isn’t just a thing to desire, it’s a person who sees, judges, chooses and acts. This acknowledging of each other’s subjectivity is the difference between love and the objectification or possessiveness.

Love and Spirituality

Thirukkural has been a topic of much academic discussion for its romance and the role of spiritual experience. For some commentators, the Inbam section is an allegory of the soul’s love for the divine, with romantic love as a metaphor. Others say they must read these chapters literally as referring to human romantic love. Reading more wisely, we must acknowledge that these readings do not have to be mutually exclusive. Thiruvalluvar is saying that romantic love and spiritual love are not the same in essence, but are alike; not because one is a metaphor for the other, but because both are love in which the subjectivity is transcended into the oneness of the other. Thirukkural’s love philosophy has the following features:

1. The whole devotion: The devotee’s devotion to the divine is equal to the lover’s devotion to the beloved.
2. Transcendence of self: romantic love and/or spiritual love causes the distinction of the individual self to blur or disappear completely.
3. The paradox of fulfillment through loss: The lover must surrender himself/herself to the beloved in order to find fulfillment, and the spiritual seeker must give up the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ in order to become free.

4. The ineffability of experience: Both types of love are oriented towards experiences that exceed the power of language.

The parallel between romantic love and the spiritual love shows that Thiruvalluvar is talking about love as a universal phenomenon, which can exist in various forms (human or divine) but has a similar core in both forms.

This is the Social Dimensions of love

The social aspects of love are also recognized by Thirukkural, as much as the personal aspect of each lover is addressed in the Inbam section. Confidants appear in several chapters, suggesting that love is not a monadic experience but is mediated by multiple social contexts that facilitate and/or hinder it. For example, the chapter “Speaking to the Heart” (Chapter 122) illustrates the lover speaking to their heart as though it were another lover. This internal discourse can be interpreted as a sign of social nature of consciousness, because we hear what others hear, and we see what others see, and we hear our thoughts and see our thoughts: we have an internal forum for discussion, which is us. Further, the outward symptoms of love (pallor, tears, emaciation) are read by others and are thus public expressions of private emotion. This indicates that love is a need for recognition and validation not only from the beloved, but also from the social world. The lover desires to be loved; to be thought to be loving; to have the community recognize his or her love. Much of the drama of the love chapters of Thirukkural is produced by the conflict between love expressed in the private sphere and love expressed in the public sphere. Love involves a choice between hiding it and showing it, keeping it private and sharing it, in the face of others’ judgement.

Comparative Perspectives

In dialoguing Thirukkural’s philosophy of love with other philosophical systems both distinctive and universal aspects are brought to light.

Plato’s Symposium

Thiruvalluvar also acknowledges that love is a power which elevates and transforms human consciousness, as in the case of Plato. Thiruvalluvar, however, gives romantic love its own value and dignity, whereas Plato is ultimately putting the earthly love away from the Form of Beauty toward intellectual contemplation.

Medieval Courtly Love

Like Thirukkural, the troubadours of medieval Europe, seek the spiritual uplift of love and its idealization of the beloved and its emphasis on longing. In both traditions, the value of obstacles and separation is known as productive. But courtly love can be unfulfilled and Thirukkural expects and celebrates coming together.

Sufi Mysticism

The concept of romantic love is a vehicle for the expression of divine love in Islamic mystical poetry, especially the Persian tradition, a parallel with possible readings of Thirukkural. In both traditions, love is seen as self transcendent and as some kind of pruning of the boundaries of the self.

Psychoanalytic Theory

Love is the theme of interest in modern psychoanalytical theories, especially that of object-relations theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis, which share Thirukkural’s fascination with the presence of absence and the lack of absence in desire. They both understand that desire is maintained by the distance between the subject and the object and between self and other.

Contemporary Relevance

Although of ancient origin, Thirukkural's concept of love has been of great relevance to the current debates in philosophy, psychology and gender studies.

Philosophy of Emotion

Recent philosophers of emotion have criticized the traditional notion that emotions are simply "passive" feelings, proposing instead that emotions are accompanied by cognitive appraisals, bodily reactions, and action tendencies. The cognitive, emotional and physical aspects of love that are treated holistically in Thirukkural prefigures these modern insights.

Feminist Philosophy

Thirukkural is embedded in the patriarchy of its era, but its understanding of "mutual subjectivity" between lovers, and its ability to allow for the expression of female desire and suffering, provides tools for feminist reimaginations of love in terms of true mutuality.

Psychology of Attachment

In modern attachment theory, the study of early relational experiences that influence later romantic relationships, the principle that love is a vulnerable, dependant, and risk of loss experience can be seen as aligning with Thirukkural's understanding of love. Thirukkural's understanding of love is in line with the modern attachment theory, which connects early relational experiences with later romantic relationships, suggesting that love is a vulnerable, dependant, and risk of loss experience. In both kinds of approaches, love is an intense restructuring of oneself with respect to another.

Philosophy of Embodiment

The twentieth century phenomenology, especially the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his followers has undermined the dualism of mind and body and developed a phenomenology of the lived body. These phenomenological approaches are in accord with Thirukkural's treatment of the embodiment of love.

Conclusion

Thirukkural, through the words of Thiruvalluvar, is a complex and insightful work that examines love, one of the most universal and enigmatic of human experiences. It analyzes the stages, expressions and inner dynamics of love in a systematic way to create a comprehensive framework that reflects the emotional and ethical aspects of love. It sees love as a transformative power that can change the human condition and consciousness, and puts a greater emphasis on the actual physical and mental signs of love. The presence and absence of individuals' lives and the interplay between them is then examined: how emotions are fueled by a sense of longing, separation, memory, imagination and dreams. Concurrently, it presents the ethical nature of love, its vulnerability, fidelity and authenticity, and draws some parallels between romantic and spiritual love. Though it's frequently a feeling that's personal to the individual, love is also depicted as having a more social dimension that affects relationships, actions, and moral values in society.

Unlike many other works on love, Thirukkural doesn't limit love to biological instincts, social constructs, spiritual analogies or to psychological states. Rather, it offers love as a whole, as it involves every dimension of human life – physical, mental, personal, social, temporal, and eternal, immanent and transcendent. Furthermore, Thirukkural shows an amazing balance between systematic analysis and poetic evocation. The couplets are at once philosophical statements and artistic works that perform the experiences they depict. The reader isn't just learning about love in

his or her head but is also encouraged to enter the narrative imaginatively, to experience what the book is describing.

Thirukkural is a refreshing reminder in today's day and age where cynicism rules about love, where love is reduced to the chemical processes of one's organism or to social performance, or where love is idealized, unrealistically, in abstraction. It accepts the agonies of love, yet doesn't diminish the joys; it sees the physical realities of love, but doesn't detract from its physicality; it celebrates the joys of love while simultaneously seeing the challenges. The philosophy of love in Thirukkural is not a prescription for answers to the mysteries of love, but rather a way of thinking about love that is characterised by its universality and particularity, its accessibility and ineffability. It invites each reader, each generation to enter into dialogue with its wisdom and to discover in these ancient words the resources needed to understand their own experiences of love in their own historical and cultural context.

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