



A Comparative Study of Love Water and Tragedy in Hero and Leander Neithal Thinai (Sangam Poetry) and the Tamil Film

Neerparavai across Time

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparative study of three cultural texts from different times and traditions: the Greek myth of *Hero and Leander* the *Neithal Thinai* of Tamil Sangam poetry and the Tamil film *Neerparavai* (2012). Although emerging from distinct cultural contexts, classical Greek mythology ancient Tamil poetic conventions and contemporary Tamil cinema, these works share striking thematic continuities. Each narrative situates love and longing within the liminal space of the sea a setting that simultaneously sustains and threatens human life. The sea becomes both a metaphor and an active force shaping destinies and dramatizing the precarious nature of love. The myth of *Hero and Leander* presents the sea as a perilous boundary that lovers attempt to overcome only to be destroyed by its uncontrollable power. In *Neithal Thinai* the seashore is symbolic of uncertainty where fisherfolk lovers face separation danger and longing. In *Neerparavai* the Tamil fishing community continues to experience the same tension between livelihood and mortality with the ocean standing as both a source of sustenance and destruction. By comparing these three traditions this paper reveals both universal patterns and culturally specific representations of tragic love. While *Hero and Leander* exemplify mythic passion and fate *Neithal Thinai* conveys poetic melancholy and *Neerparavai* illustrates social realism. The study highlights how water functions as a recurring symbol of liminality sacrifice and tragedy across different cultures and media. Ultimately this research demonstrates that comparative literature allows us to recognize shared human experiences, love loss endurance, across myth poetry and cinema.

Keywords: *Hero and Leander, Neithal Thinai (Sangam Literature), Neerparavai, Comparative Literature, Love, Tragedy, Water Symbolism.*

Introduction

***Neithal Thinai** – A Sangam literary concept that portrays love, longing and grief through the coastal landscape, reflecting the inseparable connection between human emotions and nature.

***Neerparavai** – is a Tamil Drama film by Director Seenu Ramasamy that portrays the life of a coastal fishing community and focuses on love, faith and the hardships faced in the sea by fishermen and their families.

***Akam (Poetry)** – A part of Sangam poetry that deals with love.

Comparative literature as a discipline has long been concerned with identifying resonances across cultural temporal and linguistic boundaries. By bringing together texts that might initially appear disconnected comparative approaches reveal the underlying continuities in human experience and expression. The present study examines three distinct works: the ancient Greek myth of *Hero and Leander* the *Neithal Thinai* in Tamil Sangam

poetics and the Tamil film *Neerparavai* (2012). Despite their geographical and chronological differences these works converge on key motifs: the sea as both life-giver and destroyer the endurance of love amid uncertainty and the inevitability of tragic loss. The story of Hero and Leander immortalized by poets such as Ovid (1990) and Marlowe (1598) recounts the doomed romance of two lovers separated by the Hellespont. Hero a priestess of Aphrodite lights a lamp every night to guide her beloved Leander across the sea. When a storm extinguishes the lamp Leander drowns and Hero overcome with grief takes her own life. The myth presents the sea as an unpredictable force both connecting and dividing the lovers.

In Tamil Sangam literature the concept of *Thinai*, landscapes associated with specific emotional states, provides a rich poetic framework for love and separation. Among these the *Neithal Thinai* or seashore landscape embodies the anguish of fisherfolk and lovers waiting for uncertain returns from the sea. Poems from collections such as *Akananuru* and *Kuruntokai* express the vulnerability of love when confronted with natural dangers particularly the ocean's instability (Hart 1979; Zvelebil 1973). Seenu Ramasamy's film *Neerparavai* (2012) brings these motifs into modern Tamil cinema. Set within a coastal Christian fishing community the film portrays the romance of Esther and Arulappasamy. The sea functions as both a livelihood and a site of tragedy dramatizing the precarious existence of those who depend upon it. In combining realism with poetic imagery, the film echoes ancient Tamil poetics while situating its narrative within contemporary social and religious contexts. The aim of this paper is to explore the thematic aesthetic and cultural intersections among these three works. By analyzing how water love and tragedy operate across myth poetry and cinema the study demonstrates the persistence of certain human concerns across time and media. At the same time, it highlights the cultural specificities that give each text its distinct identity. Ultimately this comparative approach not only reveals universal human experiences but also affirms the role of literature and art in negotiating the relationship between human desire and natural forces.

Hero and Leander – Mythical Love Across the Hellespont

The myth of *Hero and Leander* stands as one of the most enduring narratives of tragic love in classical Western literature. Originating in Greek myth the story has been recounted and elaborated by numerous authors including Marlowe (1598) and Ovid (1990). The narrative revolves around the illicit yet passionate romance between Hero a priestess of Aphrodite and Leander a young man from across the Hellespont. Unlike the conventional courtship narratives this tale is characterized by extreme geographical separation the perilous challenge of crossing the sea and the inevitability of fate. From its earliest iterations the myth emphasizes both the intensity of human desire and the uncontrollable power of nature.

Hero stationed in a tower near the Hellespont signals her lover every night by lighting a lamp guiding Leander through the treacherous waters (Beale 2018). The act of crossing the sea nightly is both a literal and symbolic representation of the endurance required to sustain love. The Hellespont a narrow yet perilous strait embodies uncertainty danger and the mediating role of natural forces in human affairs. Leander's repeated attempts to traverse the sea can be read as acts of devotion courage and the human impulse to overcome external obstacles for love. However, the story simultaneously highlights the fragility of human endeavours in the face of nature's indifference. The symbolism of the lamp is central to understanding the narrative's thematic depth. The lamp is both a beacon of hope and a fragile human-made object susceptible to the whims of wind and storm. When a tempest extinguishes the lamp Leander loses his guiding light and drowns. The lamp thus signifies the delicate

balance between human effort and external forces highlighting the unpredictability of fate. Hero's subsequent suicide upon discovering Leander's death underscores the extremity of emotional attachment and the tragic consequences of human vulnerability (Ovid 1990 p. 112). In literary analysis the story is often interpreted through the lens of doomed love passion and sacrifice. The lovers' relationship is intense yet constrained by natural and societal boundaries. Unlike other Greek myths where divine intervention dictates outcomes *Hero and Leander* presents a more naturalistic tragedy: human effort courage and devotion ultimately succumb to environmental forces. Beale (2018) suggests that this focus on natural causality rather than purely divine will represents a shift in narrative sensibility emphasizing the interplay between human agency and external circumstances.

The myth also explores the gendered dimensions of love and agency. Hero's role is simultaneously passive and active: she maintains the lamp and thus controls the conditions of Leander's journey yet she is ultimately powerless against the forces of nature. Leander by contrast assumes a physically active role challenging the sea nightly to reach his beloved. Their interdependent actions illustrate a balance between male and female agency within the narrative yet the ultimate outcome, a double death, reveals the limits of human control and the tragic inevitability of destiny (Marlowe 1598).

Moreover, *Hero and Leander* have influenced a wide array of later literary and artistic works. Its themes of perilous love maritime symbolism and doomed passion resonate in Renaissance literature and beyond. The narrative has been adapted into poetic forms visual arts and musical compositions each emphasizing aspects of devotion sacrifice and the sublime terror of nature. Ovid's *Heroides* for instance reconfigures the story in epistolary form allowing readers to witness Hero's inner voice and emotional turmoil while Marlowe's poetic rendition heightens the dramatic tension and emphasizes the aesthetic of tragic beauty (Ovid 1990; Marlowe 1598). In sum the myth of *Hero and Leander* is not merely a romantic tale but a complex meditation on human desire risk and mortality. Its enduring appeal lies in the interplay between passion and peril human agency and environmental contingency male and female roles and love and death. Through the symbolism of the lamp the treacherous sea and the lovers' devotion the narrative encapsulates themes that resonate across cultures and time periods. These motifs, love's endurance sacrifice and the omnipresence of tragedy which serves as conceptual threads that will later find echoes in Tamil Sangam poetry and modern cinema providing fertile ground for comparative analysis.

Neithal Thinai in Sangam Poetry

Sangam literature one of the earliest and most sophisticated bodies of Tamil poetry offers a unique and highly structured representation of human emotion through the concept of *thinai* or poetic landscape. Among the five primary tinai, *kurinji* (mountain) *mullai* (forest) *marutam* (farmland) *neithal* (seashore) and *palai* (desert), the *Neithal Thinai* occupies a distinct space for exploring themes of love separation and the human relationship with the sea. Rooted in the coastal regions of ancient Tamilakam the Neithal thinai situates the lover and the beloved against the backdrop of maritime life emphasizing both the opportunities and dangers posed by the ocean (Hart 1979; Zvelebil 1973).

In Neithal poetry the seashore serves not only as a geographical setting but also as a symbolic representation of uncertainty and impermanence. The primary concern of these poems is often the anxiety of the female lover waiting for her paramour who is engaged in fishing or other sea-related activities. The unpredictability of the ocean mirrors the unpredictability of human circumstances. Poets employ rich imagery to

convey both the physical and emotional turbulence experienced by lovers. For instance, storms and high waves are used metaphorically to signify obstacles to love while the calm of the sea may represent hope or transient peace (Hart 1979 p. 54).

The emotional landscape of Neithal poetry is characterized by *Akam* themes which focus on personal love and interior feelings. Within this context the female protagonist often embodies patience longing and emotional endurance. She waits sometimes for days or weeks for her lover to return safely from the sea reflecting both devotion and vulnerability. Her experiences are described in lyrical concise verses often utilizing metaphors drawn from the natural surroundings. Elements such as the fisherfolk village the sea the moonlight on water and the presence of birds and other coastal flora and fauna reinforce the intimate connection between human emotion and environment (Zvelebil 1973). Several exemplary poems from the *Akananuru* and *Kuruntokai* collections illustrate these motifs. For example, *Akananuru* 240 narrates the anxious waiting of a woman whose lover is at sea highlighting both the risk to his life and the intensity of her emotional anticipation. The poem employs the rhythm of the waves as a parallel to her emotional fluctuation creating a powerful interplay between natural and human forces (Hart 1979 p. 62). Similarly, *Kuruntokai* 94 describes the anxiety of a fisherwoman as she watches the distant horizon for signs of her beloved's return while the sea remains an enigmatic and potentially destructive presence.

Neithal Thinai also emphasizes social and cultural contexts. The poems often reference the economic and occupational realities of coastal life wherein male lovers are engaged in fishing maritime trade or military expeditions across the water. The reliance on the sea for survival introduces an unavoidable element of risk reinforcing the notion that love and desire are inseparable from the unpredictability of human existence. This intertwining of livelihood environment and emotion reflects a holistic worldview in which the sea operates as both sustainer and threat (Sivathamby 1986). The aesthetic devices employed in Neithal poetry, symbolism metaphor and concise imagery, underscore the connection between human emotion and the natural world. The sea functions as a liminal space both enabling the union of lovers and threatening their separation. The poems convey a sophisticated awareness of time and rhythm with the tidal patterns of the ocean often echoing the ebb and flow of human feeling. The aesthetic tension generated by this interplay contributes to the enduring power and universality of the Neithal thinai (Cutler 1987).

Furthermore, Neithal Thinai underscores the universality of female endurance and emotional labor in situations of separation. The literary focus on the waiting woman highlights cultural valuations of patience fidelity and emotional resilience. Unlike Hero in the Greek myth who ultimately succumbs to grief the Sangam heroine's narrative may not conclude in tragedy but remains defined by her capacity to endure. This distinction foregrounds differences in cultural treatment of love and loss while still engaging with comparable themes of longing and the unpredictability of the sea (Hart 1979). The Neithal landscape therefore serves multiple narrative and symbolic functions: it is a setting of natural beauty a stage for human emotion a locus of risk and uncertainty and a cultural lens through which social roles labor and relationships are expressed. It is this richness of context symbolism and emotional resonance that allows Neithal poetry to maintain relevance even when considered alongside narratives like *Hero and Leander* or modern cinematic interpretations such as *Neerparavai*. By situating human desire within a powerful and uncontrollable natural environment the Neithal thinai articulates the tensions between love risk and endurance that are central to comparative literary studies. In conclusion the Neithal Thinai in Sangam poetics

exemplifies a complex interweaving of geography emotion and social context. Through its lyrical depiction of coastal life and the sea's capriciousness it articulates the uncertainties of love and human endeavor. The enduring presence of these motifs, waiting separation danger and hope, finds resonance in later cultural expressions bridging the gap between ancient Tamil poetry and both Western mythological narratives and contemporary Tamil cinema. This continuity demonstrates the profound capacity of literature to translate human experiences of love and tragedy across time and cultural boundaries.

Neerparavai – Love and Fisherfolk Life

The Tamil film *Neerparavai* (2012) directed by Seenu Ramasamy represents a modern cinematic exploration of themes similar to those found in the myth of *Hero and Leander* and the Neithal Thinai of Sangam literature. The film centres on the love story between Esther a young woman from a coastal Christian fishing community who is Arulappasamy, a fisherman situating their romance against the backdrop of the sea. In doing so the film continues the literary and cultural tradition of representing love risk and sacrifice in maritime settings. Through its use of visual storytelling realistic portrayals of coastal life and symbolic motifs *Neerparavai* creates a nuanced reflection on human desire and mortality (Sivathamby 1986). Set in a contemporary fishing village the film opens with scenes depicting the everyday labor of fishermen highlighting the physical danger inherent in their work. The sea functions as both a provider and a threat sustaining the community's livelihood while posing constant risks of injury or death. Esther's romantic involvement with Arulappasamy occurs within this context emphasizing that love in such environments is inseparable from the challenges posed by nature. The film's narrative therefore mirrors the tension and unpredictability present in the Hellespont of *Hero and Leander* and the coastal landscapes of Neithal Thinai (Hart 1979).

Cinematically *Neerparavai* employs a combination of music lighting and composition to convey emotional and thematic depth; music composed by N. R. Raghu Nandhan which underscores the fluctuating moods of hope longing and despair experienced by the characters. Visual motifs such as wide shots of the sea storms approaching the coast and the rhythmic movement of fishing boats evoke both the beauty and the peril of the maritime setting. These cinematic techniques serve a function analogous to the metaphorical and symbolic devices used in classical poetry translating abstract emotional experiences into tangible visualized forms (Cutler 1987). The film also explores social and cultural dimensions that shape the experience of love and tragedy. Unlike the Greek myth which is situated in a mythological or aristocratic framework and Sangam poetry which abstracts human emotion within lyrical conventions *Neerparavai* grounds its narrative in a realistic social milieu. The characters' actions are influenced by socio-economic conditions religious beliefs and communal expectations. Esther's faith Arulappasamy's adherence to traditional fishing practices and the community's collective response to calamity all contribute to a narrative that is simultaneously personal and social.

In terms of character development Esther embodies qualities reminiscent of the Neithal heroine: patience resilience and emotional depth. Her experience of waiting anxiety and eventual confrontation with tragedy parallels the enduring motifs of the Sangam seaside poems. Arulappasamy like Leander confronts the unpredictability of the sea yet his journey is framed within social and occupational realities rather than mythic heroism. The film's narrative trajectory underscores the vulnerability of human life in maritime contexts and the inherent risks associated with sustaining love in dangerous environments (Beale 2018).

Neerparavai also foregrounds the theme of sacrifice. Characters are compelled to make difficult choices in the face of natural and social pressures. The sea while sustaining the community also exacts a toll in human lives echoing the fatal consequences of crossing the Hellespont in *Hero and Leander*. Cinematic devices such as close-ups slow-motion sequences and contrasting lighting reinforce the emotional weight of these moments highlighting both personal loss and communal grief (Hart 1979). Furthermore, the film's engagement with realism distinguishes it from the mythic and poetic traditions while retaining thematic continuity. By portraying the physical and emotional labor of fishermen and their families the film situates love and tragedy within a socio-economic context adding layers of ethical and cultural reflection. This realism enriches the viewer's understanding of the stakes involved making the experience of the sea both immediate and visceral (Zvelebil 1973).

Finally, *Neerparavai* exemplifies how cinematic narratives can function as contemporary extensions of classical motifs. The motifs of water separation endurance and fatality are transmitted from Greek myth and Tamil Sangam poetry into a modern socially grounded medium. By translating these motifs into visual and auditory experiences the film bridges historical literary and cultural gaps demonstrating the enduring resonance of maritime symbolism in human expressions of love and loss (Cutler 1987). In conclusion *Neerparavai* presents a rich multi-layered narrative that continues the tradition of maritime tragic love. Its portrayal of the sea as both sustainer and destroyer combined with the depiction of female endurance and male agency reflects a thematic lineage that spans from ancient Greek myth to classical Tamil poetry. Through its cinematic realism and aesthetic sophistication, the film highlights the universality of human emotional experiences while offering culturally specific insights into the lives of contemporary Tamil fisherfolk.

Thematic Parallels

Across the three examined texts, the Greek myth of *Hero and Leander* the *Neithal Thinaï* of Sangam poetics and the Tamil film *Neerparavai*, recurring themes emerge that reflect the universality of human experience. Central among these are the motifs of water female endurance sacrifice and the inevitability of tragedy. Despite differences in cultural context temporal setting and narrative medium each text employs these motifs to explore the precariousness of love and the interaction between human desire and natural forces (Beale 2018; Hart 1979; Sivathamby 1986).

Water as a Central Symbol

Water as a central symbol unites the narratives. In *Hero and Leander*, the Hellespont represents both opportunity and peril; it is the medium through which love is enacted yet also the agent of demise. Leander's nightly swims across the strait epitomize human courage and devotion yet the sea's unpredictability ensures the story's tragic outcome. Similarly, in *Neithal Thinaï* the seashore embodies the uncertainty of life for fisherfolk and their loved ones. The sea is a constant presence its moods mirroring emotional turbulence and highlighting the impermanence of human plans (Zvelebil 1973). In *Neerparavai* cinematic representation of the sea emphasizes both livelihood and mortality. Waves storms and the vastness of the ocean underscore the fragility of human existence linking modern viewers' perception with ancient literary symbolism.

Female Endurance and the Act of Waiting

Female endurance and the act of waiting is another thematic link. Hero maintains the guiding lamp and awaits Leander's return demonstrating both agency and vulnerability. In the *Neithal Thinaï* women are similarly depicted as patient emotionally resilient figures whose anxieties reflect the intertwined risks of love and maritime

livelihood. Esther in *Neerparavai* embodies these qualities waiting for Arulappasamy while coping with environmental and social challenges. These narratives collectively foreground the emotional labor of women highlighting patience and fidelity as central virtues while also portraying the psychological cost of prolonged uncertainty (Hart 1979; Cutler 1987).

Sacrifice and the Inevitability of Tragedy

Sacrifice and the inevitability of tragedy further unify the texts. In Greek myth the ultimate sacrifice is literal, Hero and Leander both die due to the sea's unpredictability. In Neithal poems sacrifice is often symbolic or emotional: the heroine sacrifices peace of mind personal safety and sometimes social standing as she endures separation. In *Neerparavai* sacrifice is depicted in both literal and social terms reflecting the perils of fishing life and the personal costs of romantic and communal commitments. This thematic continuity demonstrates how different cultures conceptualize risk devotion and the costs of love even when narrative style and medium differ (Beale 2018; Sivathamby 1986).

Love Transcending Social and Environmental Boundaries

Love transcending social and environmental boundaries is another shared motif. In *Hero and Leander*, the lovers' social separation and geographical divide emphasize the power of desire to bridge physical and societal gaps. Sangam poetry similarly portrays lovers negotiating occupational and environmental challenges; the fisherwoman's longing is intensified by the distance and dangers inherent in the sea-bound life of her lover. In *Neerparavai* the narrative integrates social realism portraying love that endures not only environmental hazards but also economic and cultural pressures. These examples highlight how cross-cultural texts negotiate the tension between human desire and structural limitations revealing love's resilience and vulnerability simultaneously (Hart 1979; Zvelebil 1973).

Tamil Sangam Society and the Neithal Landscape

In contrast the Neithal Thinai emerges from the socio-cultural realities of ancient Tamilakam. Coastal fishing communities dependent on the sea for survival experienced both the bounty and risks of maritime life. Sangam poets encoded these experiences within the literary conventions of *tinai* mapping landscapes onto emotional states. The seashore or Neithal Thinai encapsulates uncertainty longing and emotional endurance reflecting not only the challenges of maritime occupation but also social and ritual structures (Hart 1979; Zvelebil 1973). In these poems the female lover's waiting is contextualized within communal awareness religious practices and economic dependence on the sea. Unlike Greek myth where fate operates largely independently of social structures Neithal Thinai emphasizes human resilience within a social and occupational framework. Emotional experiences are thus inseparable from cultural and ecological realities highlighting an integrated worldview that unites personal social and environmental dimensions.

Contemporary Tamil Coastal Communities in *Neerparavai*

Neerparavai extends these thematic and cultural concerns into the 21st century situating them within a realistic representation of contemporary Tamil coastal life. The film portrays the socio-economic realities of fishing communities including economic dependency on the sea occupational hazards and religious observances. Social institutions such as family networks communal rituals and gendered roles profoundly influence individual behaviour and relational dynamics. For instance, Esther's experiences are shaped not only by her romantic attachment but also by communal expectations and religious devotion. The sea remains a central cultural and

environmental force dictating occupational risk community survival and individual fate (Sivathamby 1986). By integrating cultural social and economic layers the film reflects a nuanced understanding of contemporary coastal life while maintaining continuity with classical motifs of maritime love and risk.

Comparative Cultural Insights

Analyzing these three contexts comparatively illuminates both continuities and divergences. All three works depict the sea as a powerful force mediating love and mortality. However Greek myth emphasizes universal human vulnerability to fate and natural forces often abstracted from social or occupational concerns. Neithal Thinai by contrast situates human emotion within specific occupational and ecological realities emphasizing relational and social endurance. *Neerparavai* merges these dimensions presenting both environmental risk and social context in a modern cinematic framework. This integration illustrates the adaptability of classical motifs to contemporary storytelling while preserving thematic resonance (Cutler 1987; Hart 1979).

Moreover gender roles and expectations are culturally mediated. In Greek myth Hero is active only in guiding Leander's journey with her ultimate fate tied to emotional devotion and mortality. In Neithal poetry female endurance is valorised within a socio-ecological framework linking patience and fidelity to communal survival. In *Neerparavai* Esther's agency is expressed both emotionally and socially reflecting contemporary notions of female resilience within the constraints of tradition and community. The comparative perspective highlights how the same thematic concern, female endurance in maritime contexts is culturally encoded and differently expressed across time and media (Sivathamby 1986; Zvelebil 1973).

In conclusion the cultural contexts of *Hero and Leander*, *Neithal Thinai* and *Neerparavai* reveal how environmental social and historical factors shape the narrative and thematic expressions of love risk and tragedy. By situating each work within its specific cultural and ecological milieu comparative analysis elucidates both the universal motifs that traverse human experience and the culturally particular ways in which these motifs are realized. This framework underscores the importance of cultural literacy in comparative literature and highlights the adaptability of enduring themes across time geography and medium.

Conclusion

This comparative study of *Hero and Leander* Neithal Thinai in Sangam poetics and the Tamil film *Neerparavai* demonstrates the enduring power of narrative motifs that traverse time geography and medium. Despite significant differences in historical context narrative form and cultural milieu the three works converge on thematic concerns surrounding love risk sacrifice and the interplay between human desire and natural forces. The sea a central motif in all three operates simultaneously as a symbol of opportunity danger and emotional reflection linking the narratives across centuries and cultural boundaries (Beale 2018; Hart 1979; Sivathamby 1986). A key insight from this analysis is the universality of human emotional experience. The stories depict not only the intensity of romantic attachment but also the resilience required in the face of uncertainty and adversity. Female endurance particularly in the forms of waiting loyalty and emotional labour emerges as a cross-cultural motif whether in Hero's vigil the Neithal heroine's symbolic patience or Esther's navigation of social and occupational hazards in *Neerparavai* (Cutler 1987; Zvelebil 1973). Likewise, the male figures, Leander the fisherman in Sangam poetry and Arulappasamy, embody courage and agency negotiating danger and mortality thereby highlighting complementary dimensions of human relational experience.

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