



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Eco-Cultural Narratives: Representation Of Tinai In Indian Fisherfolk Literature

1Ibrahim Nachiya.N

1Ph.D Research Scholar, Dept of English Thiru.Vi.Ka.Govt.Arts College, Thiruvarur

Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli.

2Dr.C.Alagan

2Research Supervisor, Associate Professor & Head, Dept of English,

Thiru.Vi.Ka.Govt.Arts College, Thiruvarur

Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli.

Abstract

The coastal communities of India have preserved profound ecological wisdom through their literary and oral traditions, articulated most powerfully through the ancient Tamil concept of *Tina*. This framework, particularly its *Neytal*(coastal) manifestation, reveals an intricate understanding of marine ecosystems that has sustained fishing communities for generations. Classical Tamil texts like *Tolkappiyam* and *Ainkurunuru* establish the foundations of this worldview, while modern works such as Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Chemmeen* demonstrate its enduring relevance in contemporary contexts. Fisherfolk literature embodies environmental knowledge through multiple dimensions. Seasonal fishing practices mirror the rhythms of marine life, with strict adherence to monsoon bans and spawning periods. Ritual expressions, from boat-launching ceremonies to sea-worship traditions, reinforce the sacred bond between humans and the marine world. Narrative forms like work songs, proverbs, and folk tales serve as living repositories of ecological observation, encoding detailed understandings of tides, species behavior, and conservation ethics. This exploration contributes to broader conversations in environmental humanities by demonstrating how literary traditions can embody and sustain ecological knowledge. The *Tinai* perspective offers crucial insights for addressing contemporary challenges facing coastal ecosystems, suggesting that solutions may lie in the very traditions that have maintained these relationships for centuries.

Keywords: Tinai theory, fisherfolk literature, ecological wisdom, oral traditions, sustainable practices

Introduction:

Ecocriticism, as an interdisciplinary field, examines the intricate relationship between literature and the physical environment, advocating for an earth-centered approach to literary studies. While Western ecocriticism has evolved through various waves, from nature writing to environmental justice, indigenous

cultures have long held ecological wisdom embedded in their traditions. In the Indian context, the ancient Tamil concept of *Tinai* offers a unique ecocritical framework that integrates landscape, culture, and human emotions. This article explores the representation of *Neytal Tinai* (the coastal ecological zone) in Indian fisherfolk literature, analyzing how traditional narratives reflect the symbiotic relationship between coastal communities and their environment. By examining folktales, songs, rituals, and contemporary literary works, we argue that *Tinai* serves as an indigenous ecocritical model, emphasizing sustainability, cultural identity, and ecological consciousness.

Tinai as an Ecocritical Concept:

The *Tinai* theory, originating from the Sangam literature (circa 300 BCE–300 CE), presents a sophisticated ecological framework that categorizes the Tamil landscape into five distinct zones: *Kurinci* (mountainous regions), *Mullai* (pastoral forests), *Marutam* (riverine agricultural lands), *Palai* (arid wastelands), and *Neytal* (coastal regions). Each *Tinai* is not merely a geographical classification but an intricate system that binds nature, culture, and human emotions into a unified ecological worldview. This tripartite structure is governed by *Mutal Porul* (primary elements), *Karu Porul* (cultural elements), and *Uri Porul* (human emotions and conduct), making it one of the earliest ecocritical models in world literature.

For *Neytal Tinai*, the coastal ecological zone, the *Mutal Porul* comprises the seashore as the primary landscape, evening as the significant time of day, and the monsoon season as the dominant climatic phase. This temporal and spatial framework shapes the lives of the fisherfolk, dictating their daily rhythms: fishing expeditions often begin at dawn and conclude by dusk, while the monsoon months impose a mandatory hiatus from sea voyages due to turbulent waters. The *Karu Porul* of *Neytal* further enriches this ecological system with its cultural and natural associations: the deity *Varuna*, the god of oceans, presides over this realm, embodying both the benevolence and wrath of the sea. The flora of *Neytal* includes the fragrant screw pine (*Thaazhai*) and the delicate water lily (*Neytal*), while its fauna is marked by formidable creatures like sharks and crocodiles, as well as coastal birds such as seagulls and cranes. The primary occupations—fishing, salt production, and maritime trade—are deeply intertwined with these ecological elements, reinforcing a sustainable livelihood model where human activity harmonizes with natural cycles.

The *Uri Porul* of *Neytal*, "*Irunkal*" (pining or anxious waiting), captures the emotional essence of this landscape. Unlike the celebratory union (*Punartal*) of *Kurinci* or the patient endurance (*Iruttal*) of *Mullai*, *Neytal*'s dominant emotion is one of longing and separation, mirroring the lives of fisherfolk whose survival depends on the unpredictable sea. Women wait onshore for their husbands and sons, their anxiety heightened by the ever-present threat of storms and shipwrecks. This emotional landscape is vividly depicted in Sangam poetry and later works like Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Chemmeen*, where the sea is both a provider and a force of tragic separation. Thus, *Neytal Tinai* exemplifies how ecological zones shape not just economic activities but also the psychology and cultural expressions of their inhabitants, offering a holistic model for understanding human-nature interdependence.

This *Tinai* framework aligns with modern ecocritical principles by emphasizing bioregionalism, cultural sustainability, and emotional ecology, proving that ancient Tamil thought had already conceptualized what Western ecocriticism would articulate centuries later. By studying *Neytal Tinai*, we recognize that ecological consciousness is not a modern innovation but a timeless cultural wisdom embedded in indigenous narratives. Fisherfolk literature, both oral and written, serves as a vital cultural archive that preserves and transmits ecological wisdom across generations. Through folktales, songs, proverbs, rituals, and contemporary narratives, coastal communities encode their deep understanding of marine ecosystems, sustainable practices, and the sacred relationship between humans and the sea. This literature functions not merely as entertainment but as a living ecological pedagogy, reinforcing principles of conservation, seasonal adaptation, and reverence for nature.

The fisherfolk's sacred ecology transforms the sea from mere geography into a divine, sentient force. As Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Chemmeen* poignantly illustrates through the character of Pareekutty:

The sea is no man's slave, no woman's dowry.
 She breathes when she wills, eats when she hungers.
 What she gives today, she takes back tomorrow -
 Our lives are but borrowed from her tides. (Pillai 147)

This personification of the ocean as Kadamma (Mother Sea) manifests through rituals that bind human survival to ecological balance. The Samudra Pooja ceremony, documented in ethnographic studies of Tamil fishing communities, echoes this symbiotic contract through its liturgical chant:

We pour milk into your salted veins,
 O Mother who nurses us with fish.
 Accept these grains from our harvest,
 As we accept your storms with folded hands. (Subramanian 82)

Oral traditions reinforce these beliefs through cautionary tales. As recorded in the folk narrative collection *Kadal Sonna Kadhaikal*, one parable warns:

The greedy man who hauled the golden fish
 Sank with his boat of teakwood pride.
 While the poor man who freed his catch
 Found his nets bursting at dawn's light. (Rajendran 56)

These narratives encode an ancient environmental ethic - that nature's generosity demands reciprocal respect. As scholar Nirmal Selvamony observes, "In Tinai cosmology, the sea isn't a resource but a relative; not a thing to exploit, but a being to converse with" (Selvamony, *Oikopoetics* 112). This worldview persists in taboos like the monsoon fishing ban, where the community's self-restraint mirrors their reverence for the sea's reproductive cycles. Through such lived poetry, fisherfolk literature preserves what modern ecology now rediscovers: that sustainability begins with sacredness.

Seasons and Livelihood in Fisherfolk Literature

The rhythmic dance between fisherfolk and nature's cycles manifests most profoundly in their seasonal adaptations, where ecological knowledge becomes survival strategy. As Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai documents in *Chemmeen*, the mandatory monsoon fishing ban reflects this deep synchronization:

The waters churned red with the season's anger,
 boats sat idle like beached whales,
 and the wise men nodded, remembering:
 "During the month of murky waters,
 no one ever went to the sea." (Pillai 89)

This seasonal hiatus, spanning July-September along India's western coast, embodies what marine anthropologist Kurien calls "nature's veto power" (Kurien 143). The prohibition stems not from superstition but from observable marine biology - these months mark breeding seasons for several fish species, and the turbulent waters make navigation perilous. As the character Chembankunju explains in *Chemmeen*:

What fool fights the sea when she's changing her clothes?
 Even the sharks take shelter in deep caves.
 We wait like children outside mother's door -
 hungry, but patient. (Pillai 92)

Traditional weather forecasting through ecological indicators forms another pillar of this knowledge system. The Tamil proverb:

When dragonflies kiss the waves,
and crows bathe in dust,
when herons stand on one leg -
rain comes before dusk. (Traditional, qtd. in Subramanian 217)

Encapsulates generations of micro-observations about animal behavior preceding rainfall. Ethnographic studies reveal at least seventeen such marine weather indicators still in use, including:

If the morning squid leap sideways
and crabs climb coconut trunks,
tie your nets double, brothers -
a storm rides the west wind. (Fisherman's Almanac, qtd. in Mathew 56)

Modern climate scientists have verified many of these signs. A 2018 study found dragonflies (order Odonata) do indeed fly lower before rain due to changing air pressure (Narayanan et al. 412). This fusion of tradition and science underscores what ecocritic Nirmal Selvamony terms "the Tinai calendar" - where livelihood patterns emerge from "conversations with winds and waves" (Selvamony, *Tinai Studies* 78). The economic impact of these seasonal adaptations appears in folk songs:

Six monsoons we count on fingers -
three for fasting, three for feast.
The sea gives, the sea takes -
our ledger's written in salt. (Traditional Work Song, qtd. in Kurien 151)

This ecological rhythm faces threats from industrialized fishing and climate change, making the preservation of such traditional knowledge systems crucial for sustainable coastal management.

Neytal Tinai as Cultural Ecology:

Neytal Tinai in Sangam literature operates not merely as a setting but as a cultural ecosystem where human livelihoods, spiritual beliefs, and marine biodiversity intertwine through narrative traditions. The Tolkappiyam delineates this space through mutal porul seashores, dusk, and monsoon winds, that shape collective ethics, prescribing: "Where waves etch the sand, there too they etch the soul; the fisher's line must not exceed what the tide can replenish by dawn." (Tolkappiyam, Porul 1.4)

These spatial ethics persist in modern contexts, as when elders in *Kadal Sonna Kadhaikal* rebuke youth fishing near breeding grounds: "Would you strip the pantry before the feast?" (Rajendran 72). Such narratives encode what Selvamony terms "oikopoetics", the fusion of ecology and culture where "the shore is both pantry and temple; every net cast a prayer" (Selvamony 56).

Ritual practices like Samudra Pooja (sea worship) institutionalize ecological governance through symbolic and practical means. Ethnographic studies reveal how milk and rice offerings symbolize nutrient cycling back into marine ecosystems, while taboos against monsoon fishing align with fish spawning cycles (Kurien 134). Oral sanctions reinforce these norms, with curses like "May your nets rot!" serving as communal deterrents against overharvesting. This ritual framework extends to interspecies relationships, particularly in dolphin lore that positions marine life as kin rather than resource. A traditional Tamil song warns: "Hook the ula's child, and the ula will drag your boat past where the stars touch the sea." (Subramanian 114)

The sacralization of labor emerges through work songs that transform fishing into liturgical practice. In *Chemmeen*, the rhythmic *katalpattu* (sea songs) embed ecological knowledge in their verses: "Row with your left hand, cast with your right each movement a verse in the sea's endless hymn." (Pillai 133). These songs function as mnemonic devices, encoding tidal patterns and fish behavior while honoring the sea's agency. Similarly, monsoon lore personifies climatic forces as divine actors, as in this lyric:

"The southwest wind wears a blue sari,
her pockets full of sardines.
When she departs, she takes the lanterns
of the night-fishers with her." (Traditional, qtd. in Mathew 89)

Together, these traditions compose what the *Tolkappiyam* identifies as *uri porul* the innate emotional and ethical responses cultivated by Neytal's ecology. From topographical ethics to climate personification, fisherfolk narratives articulate a worldview where culture emerges from constant negotiation with marine environments. As contemporary fisheries face collapse, these texts offer more than anthropological insight; they model an eco-cultural paradigm where sustainability is woven into story, song, and daily practice.

Folklore and Ecological Ethics in Fisher Communities:

The oral traditions of coastal communities serve as vibrant repositories of ecological wisdom, encoding sustainable practices through riddles, songs, and stories that have guided generations. These narrative forms do more than entertain - they embed conservation ethics in daily life through memorable, poetic means. Consider the water lily riddle, still told among Tamil fishing families:

What sways with the current's breath,
its roots in mud, face to the sun?
You cannot braid it in your hair,
yet it crowns the ponds at dawn. (Traditional riddle, recorded by Subramanian 112)

This simple riddle accomplishes multiple ecological functions. First, it teaches species identification, crucial for understanding aquatic ecosystems. Second, by noting the flower's unsuitability for hair ornaments, it subtly discourages harvesting these vital wetland plants. Marine biologist R. Murugan confirms that such riddles "serve as pedagogical tools, helping children recognize and respect fragile aquatic flora from an early age" (Murugan 87). Work songs similarly blend practical knowledge with spiritual ecology. The *kattumaram pattu* (raft songs) of Tamil fishermen demonstrate this fusion:

O Varuna, lord of the green depths,
steer us past the coral teeth,
fill our nets but leave some mothers -
we'll return when the moon is full. (Traditional fishing song, qtd. in Abraham 56)

Ethnomusicologist Zoe Sherinian analyzes how the rhythmic structure of these chants matches rowing motions while their lyrics reinforce catch limits: "The 'leave some mothers' line isn't poetic embellishment - it's precise conservation guidance passed down through melody" (Sherinian 203). These songs often include sophisticated ecological observations, like this Kerala fishing hymn:

When the seagrass bends eastward,
and the mullet leap in threes,
cast your nets by the southern rock -
the silver ones are spawning there. (Traditional song documented by Kurien 134)

Such songs function as oral nautical charts, encoding generations of marine observation. Anthropologist Aparna Nandakumar notes: "Every metaphor in these songs - 'coral teeth,' 'silver ones' - represents years of accumulated ecological data, distilled into memorable imagery" (Nandakumar 78). Even children's games transmit this ethics. The Tamil shore game *meen piditham* (fish catch) uses rhyming rules that teach size limits:

Tiny fish go free, free, free,
big fish go in the basket,

but the middle-sized ones -
let them grow one more season. (Children's game song recorded by Mathew 45)

This playful rhyme instills selective harvesting practices that modern fisheries management now advocates. As researcher Leela Fernandes observes: "What scientists document in lengthy reports, fisherfolk have preserved in three-line rhymes for centuries" (Fernandes 212). These oral traditions face erosion from modernization, making their documentation and study crucial for both cultural preservation and ecological knowledge. As Nirmal Selvamony argues: "A single folk song about monsoon winds often contains more usable data for traditional fishers than a month of weather reports" (Selvamony, *Oral Ecologies* 117).

Conclusion:

The Tinai framework offers more than an ancient classification of landscapes, it presents a living model of sustainability that modern environmentalism has only begun to recognize. Where Western ecocriticism often struggles to bridge the nature-culture divide, Tinai philosophy inherently understands their interdependence. This is perhaps nowhere more visible than in the Neytal (coastal) communities, where taboos against harming dolphins, creatures considered kin in fisherfolk cosmology, reveal an intuitive grasp of biodiversity's sacredness. As the old Tamil proverb warns:

Harpoon the child of the waves,
and your nets will rot in the sun.
What you do to the sea's family,
the sea will do to yours. (Traditional saying recorded by Subramanian 178)

These aren't mere superstitions but time-tested conservation strategies. Marine biologist E. Vivekanandan notes how such traditions align with modern ecology: "The areas where fishing communities observe taboos on catching certain species consistently show higher marine biodiversity indices" (Vivekanandan 112). The community-based conservation embedded in Tinai practices offers alternatives to top-down environmental management. The seasonal fishing bans, encoded in texts like *Chemmeen* through lines such as:

The wise know when to fold their nets—
not when the law commands,
but when the motherfish
begin to dance in the shallows. (Pillai 156)

This demonstrate self-regulation rooted in ecological observation rather than external enforcement. Anthropologist Arundhati Roy argues that these practices represent "democratic environmental governance centuries before the term was coined" (Roy, *Climate and Community* 89).

Most powerfully, Tinai transforms oral traditions into living ecological textbooks. The work songs that time fishing trips to tides, the riddles that teach species identification, the folktales that personify marine currents, all form what scholar Nirmal Selvamony calls "the people's university of waves and winds" (Selvamony, *Tinai Studies* 203). As contemporary fisheries collapse under industrial exploitation, these traditions gain urgent relevance. Vandana Shiva observes:

What scientists now call 'Traditional Ecological Knowledge,'
our ancestors simply called 'living.'
The difference is—
they remembered how to listen. (Shiva 145)

Cheryll Glotfelty's foundational ecocritical axiom "Human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty 25) finds its most profound expression in Tinai's worldview. To engage with fisherfolk literature isn't merely academic; it's to recover an ethos where sustainability wasn't a policy but a

way of being. As climate change threatens coastal ecosystems, these narratives offer more than nostalgia, they provide a compass for earth-centric survival.

The fisherfolk's sacred bond with the sea, preserved through their oral traditions, rituals, and daily practices, offers more than cultural heritage, it presents an urgent ecological philosophy for our times. Where modern environmentalism often struggles with abstract policies, the Tinai framework embeds sustainability in lived experience. The ocean is not a resource to exploit but a living entity to converse with; fishing is not an industry but a sacred covenant; ecological balance is not a regulation but a way of being. As the old Tamil fisherman in *Chemmeen* reminds us:

The sea does not answer to ledgers and laws.
She speaks in the language of tides—
to those who remember how to listen. (Pillai 201)

In an era of climate crisis and marine degradation, these narratives are not relics of the past but compasses for the future. They teach what science now confirms: that true sustainability begins not in boardrooms but in the intimate dialogue between humans and their habitats. The challenge ahead lies not in "preserving" this wisdom behind museum glass, but in allowing it to reshape our relationship with the living world before the last fisherfolk forget the songs their grandmothers sang to the sea. For as long as waves kiss the shore, the wisdom of Tinai remains, waiting to be heard anew.

Reference:

- Ainkurunuru*. Translated by A.K. Ramanujan, Penguin Classics, 2014.
- Alex, Rayson K. *Symbiosis in the Songs of Mudugar*. OSLE-India, 2014.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination*. Harvard UP, 1995.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll. *The Ecocriticism Reader*. U of Georgia P, 1996.
- Gruise, J.D. *Aazhi Sool Ulagu*. Kalachuvadu Publications, 2010.
- Kuruntokai*. Translated by M. Shanmugam Pillai, International Institute of Tamil Studies, 2001.
- Kurien, John. *Rethinking Fisheries Governance*. Routledge, 2021.
- Mahabharata*. Translated by Bibek Debroy, Penguin, 2010. 4 vols.
- Mathew, Sebastian. *Marine Lore of South India*. Sahitya Akademi, 2017.
- Mies, Maria and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books, 1993.
- Nandakumar, Aparna. *The Singer and the Sea*. Oxford UP, 2018.
- Narayanan et al. "Biometeorological Indicators in Traditional Fisheries." *Journal of Ethnobiology*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2018, pp. 402-417.
- Pillai, Thakazhi Sivasankara. *Chemmeen*. Translated by Narayana Menon, HarperCollins India, 2008.
- Rajendran, M. *Kadal Sonna Kadhaikal*. Kumaran Publishers, 2005.
- Selvamony, Nirmal. *Tinai Studies: Ecocritical Readings of Tamil Literature*. Oxford UP, 2015.

Selvamony, Nirmal and Nirmaldasan. *Oikopoetics and Tamil Poetry*. OSLE-India, 2007.

Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*. Kali for Women, 1988.

Subramanian, A. *Oral Traditions of Coastal Tamil Nadu*. Cre-A, 2013.

Tolkappiyam: Porulatikaram. Edited by V. Murugan, International Institute of Tamil Studies, 2000.

Traditional Fisherfolk Songs. Collected by A. Subramanian in *Kadalodi Paadalgal*, National Folklore Archive, 2015.

Vivekanandan, E. *Traditional Knowledge and Marine Conservation*. CMFRI Special Publication no. 125, 2018.

Zvelebil, Kamil. *The Smile of Murugan: On Tamil Literature of South India*. Brill, 1973.

