



Literary Enigma

The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-reviewed and Indexed)

Vol. 2, Issue: 2

April 2025

Article No 7

1. Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Chikkanna Government Arts
College, Tirupur, India
2. Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Chikkanna Government Arts
College, Tirupur, India

Page No: 51-56



Analysis of the Amalgamation of Music and Tamil Theatrics in Therukoothu Performances through the lens of New Historicism

Veena SP¹ and Dr. S Parvin Banu²

Abstract

Tamil Nadu, with its rich cultural heritage, boasts a diversified range of performance arts that have endured through time and cultural evolution. Among these, Therukoothu stands out as a dynamic and evolving form of theatrical art, embodying the spirit of Tamil performance traditions and conventions. Rooted in folklore, mythology, and social commentary, Therukoothu is more than an art form as it is a medium for cultural preservation, social engagement, and artistic innovation. Traditionally performed in open spaces, this vibrant theatrical expression captures the essence of Tamil Nadu's cultural narrative, blending music, dance, and drama into a spectacle. The performers, adorned in elaborate costumes and makeup, bring ancient stories and contemporary issues to life, engaging the community in a shared cultural experience. Therukoothu has historically been a tool for social commentary, addressing societal issues, and imparting moral lessons through its storytelling aspect. The evolution of Therukoothu reflects the dynamic nature of Tamil society. While retaining its traditional roots, it has adapted to contemporary themes and modern sensibilities, ensuring its relevance in today's world. The types of Therukoothu performances are varied, ranging from mythological epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana to stories that address current social issues such as corruption, inequality, and environmental concerns. This article aims to delve into the cultural factors that have shaped Therukoothu, tracing its significance, relevance and a deeper understanding of Therukoothu that continues to influence the society it represents.

Keywords: Therukoothu, Tamil Nadu, Performance, Mythology, Culture.

This work is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

Analysis of the Amalgamation of Music and Tamil Theatrics in Therukoothu Performances through the lens of New Historicism

Introduction

Therukoothu, the performance art from Tamil Nadu is an integral element of the diverse performance arts heritage of Tamil Nadu. It acts as a cultural carrier that facilitates cultural sustainability and artistic expression. Therukoothu, a historically significant art form, has preserved its traditional essence while evolving to address contemporary themes, ensuring its continued relevance in modern society. Its immersive nature, with performers often mingling with the audience, creates a communal experience that strengthens social bonds and fosters a collective cultural identity. The evolution of Therukoothu reflects the dynamic nature of Tamil society, embracing changes in performance styles, narratives, and participant demographics, including the significant inclusion of female performers. The performers, adorned in elaborate costumes and makeup, bring to life stories from revered epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana. Additionally, they address modern social issues such as corruption, inequality, and environmental concerns, showcasing Therukoothu's dual focus on ancient and contemporary themes. This versatility underscores the enduring appeal of the art form, resonating with audiences across different generations and social strata.

Furthermore, regional variations within Tamil Nadu have led to a rich diversity in Therukoothu performances, each offering unique interpretations and stylistic nuances. This study aims to delve into the cultural factors that have shaped Therukoothu, tracing its historical significance and exploring its contemporary relevance. By examining the evolution and diverse types of this art form, the research highlights Therukoothu's enduring impact on Tamil society. Through this exploration, we gain a deeper understanding of how Therukoothu continues to influence and inspire the communities it represents, maintaining its status as a living tradition that bridges the past and the present.

The study also focuses on the role of technology and media in promoting and preserving Therukoothu, examining how digital platforms and modern communication methods have contributed to its outreach and evolution. By integrating traditional and contemporary elements, Therukoothu exemplifies the resilience and adaptability of cultural practices in the face of changing societal dynamics.

Forms of Therukoothu

In Tamil Nadu, Therukoothu has several forms, each with its unique characteristics and cultural significance. Among these are Kazhaikoothu, Kaniyaankoothu, and Paavaikoothu. These performances collectively fall under the umbrella of Therukoothu, which translates to "street performance" and signifies an art form traditionally performed in open spaces accessible to the community. Each variant has its distinct style and thematic focus, contributing to the diversity of Tamil performance art. One prominent form of Therukoothu is the spiritual variant, which holds significant contemporary relevance. This form is typically performed during temple festivals, public mourning ceremonies, and at sites of worship. It aims to captivate a diverse audience, drawing people from various backgrounds within the region. The spiritual Therukoothu serves not only as entertainment but also as a medium for spiritual expression and communal participation, reinforcing social and religious bonds.

New Historicism Theory and Therukoothu

New Historicism, a theory propounded by Stephen Greenblatt and others, emphasizes the interconnection between literature and history. It suggests that literary works are products of their cultural and historical contexts and should be analyzed alongside the societal and political conditions of their time. This theory challenges the notion of viewing literature and artform in isolation, instead advocating for an understanding of how texts both influence and

are influenced by their cultural scenario. Therukoothu, a traditional form of street theatre in Tamil Nadu, serves as an example of the region's historical and cultural dynamics.

Therukoothu has its roots in ancient Tamil society and has evolved over centuries. This traditional art form was not only a means of entertainment but also a tool for social commentary and education. It often depicted stories from Hindu epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, embedding moral and ethical lessons within its performances. Analyzing Therukoothu from a New Historicist perspective involves exploring how historical events, social structures, and cultural norms of different eras influenced the themes and narratives of these performances. For instance, during the colonial period, Therukoothu might have incorporated subtle critiques regarding British rule or would have highlighted the struggles of common people under colonial oppression. Thus the art form has served as a medium of resistance and a way to preserve cultural identity. Understanding these historical contexts allows us to see Therukoothu as a dynamic art form that reflects societal changes. Different regions and communities in Tamil Nadu have developed their unique styles and variations of this traditional theatre, influenced by local customs, dialects, and cultural practices. New Historicism encourages us to look at these variations not merely as artistic differences but as reflections of the diverse historical and cultural experiences of these communities. The interaction of Therukoothu with modernity is another critical aspect to consider. As Tamil Nadu has undergone rapid modernization and urbanization, traditional art forms like Therukoothu have faced challenges in maintaining their relevance. However, they have also found new expressions and platforms, adapting to contemporary issues and incorporating modern elements. Considering the New Historicist viewpoint, this adaptation is significant. It demonstrates how cultural forms are not static but continually evolve in response to changing historical conditions.

By examining Therukoothu through this theoretical lens, we can appreciate it not just as a form of entertainment but as a dynamic cultural practice that reflects and responds to the complexities of its time. This approach underscores the importance of understanding literature and art within their broader socio-historical frameworks, enriching our appreciation of their significance and impact.

Artists and Social Factors

Historically, Therukoothu, a traditional street theatre of Tamil Nadu, was predominantly performed by male artists, especially in the 20th century. Male performers mostly portrayed all roles, including female characters. However, as societal norms evolved, the art form also underwent significant changes. Women gradually began to participate actively, assuming lead roles as performers and musicians within Therukoothu troupes. This shift not only enriched the performances with diverse perspectives but also marked a crucial step towards gender inclusivity in the performing arts. Today, women play an integral role in Therukoothu, ensuring its continued evolution and relevance in contemporary society. Therukoothu troupes can be categorized into two types: those who perform as a ritual or tradition within their geographical area and those who perform professionally. Professional troupes often showcase their art at Sabhas and Mandrams, which serve as cultural guilds and associations in Tamil Nadu. Therukoothu was once the most popular form of performing arts in Southern Tamil Nadu but began to lose its prominence with the rise of Sankaradasa Swamigal dramas in the region. Therukoothu has been integral to rituals during Draupadi Amman temple festivals in Southern Tamil Nadu. These performances, accompanied by musical instruments and a chorus team, typically spanned a cycle of 30 days. The ritualistic Therukoothu depicted prominent scenes from the Mahabharata, such as the Pandava wedding, the sacrifice of Aravan, and the swayamvar of Draupadi. These performances were regarded as acts of worship, embodying spirituality and imbuing both the art and the artists with a sense of sacredness. Besides Draupadi Amman temples, Therukoothu performances were also

integral to festivals and worship at Murugan temples, Ayyanar temples, and other related sites, highlighting the art form's deep-rooted cultural and religious significance.

Influence of Indian Epics

The plot of Therukoothu predominantly features stories and subplots from the Mahabharata, influenced by the widespread familiarity and popularity of this epic among the local populace. This familiarity ensured that audiences were both engaged and entertained by the performances. Key aspects of the Mahabharata, such as the teachings of Lord Krishna, the wedding of Prince Arjuna, and the game of dice, were frequently used as central themes in these performances. Similarly, significant events from the Ramayana were also enacted, broadening the scope of Therukoothu's narrative theme. During the 1980s, there were approximately 56 types of Therukoothu performances based on these two great Indian epics. These performances were alike to the mystery and miracle plays of medieval England, presented as a series of plays in a cycle. Each cycle could last anywhere from 13 days to a maximum of 67 days, depending on the complexity and breadth of the narrative being portrayed.

Notable episodes from the Ramayana, such as the marriage of Lord Rama, the slaying of Vaali (Vaali Moksha), and the destruction of Lanka (Lanka Dahan), were among the popular segments performed. These episodes were selected for their dramatic appeal and moral significance, which resonated deeply with the audience. The cyclical nature of these performances ensured a comprehensive storytelling approach, allowing for in-depth exploration of various episodes from the epics. This structure also facilitated a communal experience, as audiences would gather over an extended period to witness the unfolding drama, thereby reinforcing cultural bonds and shared heritage. The enduring popularity of these narratives underscores their profound impact on the cultural and social fabric of Tamil Nadu, cementing Therukoothu's role as a vital medium of cultural expression and preservation.

Components of a Therukoothu Performance

The musical instrument Harmonium plays an indispensable role in the performance of Therukoothu, serving as a key component in the musical ensemble. Other essential instruments include the Tabla, Dol, and Mridangam, which together create the rhythmic foundation for the performance. Notably, Therukoothu does not have traditional stages, opting instead for a more immersive experience by performing amidst the audience, either in the streets or in the backyards of temples. This intimate setting enhances the communal atmosphere and allows the audience to engage closely with the performance. The performance space is often demarcated by screens bearing the name of the performing troupe, providing a backdrop that also serves as a marker of the group's identity. Benches are typically provided for certain sections of the audience, ensuring some level of comfort while maintaining the informal, accessible nature of the event. Historically, Therukoothu performances were illuminated by lamps and natural lighting, which added to the traditional and rustic charm of the spectacle. The preparation of the performers, particularly the facial makeup, is a crucial aspect of Therukoothu. Makeup is applied according to the characters being portrayed, with antagonists receiving their makeup first. Their makeup predominantly features groundnut oil and a red colour base to effectively convey their menacing roles. This careful attention to makeup helps evoke the desired emotional response from the audience and enhances the visual storytelling. All necessary accessories are meticulously organized based on the priority of the characters. Prominent characters are adorned with larger, more elaborate accessories to highlight their importance, and their hairdos are styled to complement their costumes. Optional accessories, such as garlands and anklets, are provided depending on the troupe's budget, allowing for some variation in the visual presentation. The role of musical instruments, the unique performance settings, and the detailed preparation of makeup and accessories all contribute to the

distinctiveness of Therukoothu. These elements together create a rich, immersive experience that underscores the art form's enduring appeal and cultural significance.

Performing Therukoothu

Therukoothu is usually performed at a four cross junction where one part of the junction is used as the performance area and the rest is used by the audience. The musical instruments are played as an indication that the performance was about to commence. Once when the screen is taken off a character called Kattiyakaran appears. This character is quite similar to the fools and clowns found in the Shakespearean dramas. The purpose of this character that interacts with the audience is to evoke humour, satire and to explain the theme of the performance directly to the audience. This character gives a brief introduction as explains the protagonist of the story. The protagonist do not usually reveal themselves during the introduction and recite dialogues from corners to create anticipation among the audience. The dialogues are mostly written in conversational form and rarely monologues were used. The conclusion part of the performance is usually regarded as Mangalam.

The number of people performing the art varies from minimum of 10 -20 people depending on the story line. Vaathiyar known as the teacher or instructor directs the entire performance. Vaathiyar selects the person and forms the troop to perform. It is observed that Vaathiyar performs on Vijayadasami day which is considered as an auspicious day in India to begin any learning process. The age of the performers is diverse depending on the roles and characters in the performance. There are mild variations in the performances between the northern Tamil Nadu and the Southern Tamil Nadu practices. Usually the region near the Southern rivers follow the Southern aesthetics of Therukoothu. The Southern convention mostly performs Ramayana based stories, Harichandran stories and few stories regarding the Southern temples are performed. Whereas the Northern Tamil aesthetics performs Mahabharat based stories. These performers adorn themselves with wooden jewellery. The region like Cuddalore and Chidambaram follow the Northern Tamil art aesthetics. The performers usually wear skirts made out of Hay as a part of their costume. Variations in music, performance and plot are observed between the Northern and Southern aesthetics of art pertaining to Therukoothu. Apart from these two forms in Tamil Nadu regions like Dharmapuri and nearby districts had distinctive changes in the art form due to the influence of Telugu language as they were close to the borders of Andhra and Telugu speaking community. These performers were made to perform in Telugu also to entertain the local audience. The Telugu dialogues were written in Tamil and the actors were made to memorise the lines. The ultimate aim was to perform and establish the art form beyond language and cultural boundaries. The artists took rigorous training and efforts to enhance the art form with no compromises in the quality of the art being delivered and performed in front of the audience.

Conclusion

Therukoothu remains a vibrant and essential component of Tamil Nadu's rich cultural component and an integral performance art that has endured through time, adapting to the changing cultural scenario while preserving its traditional roots. As a medium that blends music, dance, and drama, Therukoothu not only entertains but also serves as a powerful tool for social commentary and cultural preservation. Its performances, deeply rooted in folklore and mythology, portray ancient stories and contemporary issues to life that render a shared cultural experience and engage the community in meaningful dialogue. The adaptability of Therukoothu is a testament to its resilience and relevance. By incorporating contemporary themes such as corruption, inequality, and environmental concerns, it continues to address pressing societal issues, much like it has historically imparted moral lessons through its storytelling. The ability to evolve while maintaining its core traditions imparts that Therukoothu remains pertinent in today's world. The various types of Therukoothu

performances, from mythological epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana to modern narratives, reflect the nature of Tamil society. The elaborate costumes, makeup, and the immersive nature of the performances further enhance the audience's experience, making Therukoothu a celebrated art form.

By analysing the significance and contemporary relevance of Therukoothu, the study identifies the cultural factors and components of Therukoothu that shaped its evolution. As a testimony of Tamil Nadu's artistic heritage, Therukoothu portrays the region's ability to honor its past while embracing the future, ensuring that the traditional art form remains a vibrant and integral part of Tamil culture. By viewing the art form Therukoothu through the theoretical lens of New Historicism we find that the art form was not just as a form of entertainment but as a dynamic cultural product that reflects and responds to the complexities of its time. The theoretical analysis validates the importance of understanding literature and art within their broader socio-historical frameworks.

References

- 1) Chandrakumar, S. (2024). Humanity activity of Nanthan Character in Veerakumarn Vadamodi Koothu – A study. *Shanlax International Journal of Tamil Research*, 8(3), 58–64. <https://doi.org/10.34293/tamil.v8i3.7088>
- 2) Gallagher, C., & Greenblatt, S. (2000). *Practicing new historicism*. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226772561.001.0001>
- 3) Hollander, J. (2007). Indian folk theatres. In *Routledge eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203945285>
- 4) Manthravadi, U. (2017). How they changed: Therukoothu performace in a noisy city. *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 141(5_Supplement), 3858. <https://doi.org/10.1121/1.4988613>
- 5) Muthukumaraswamy, M. D. (2016). Draupadi Kuravanchi Koothu. In *Draupadi Kuravanchi Koothu* (pp. 237–252). <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc5pg6c.24>
- 6) Richmond, F., & Paniker, N. (1995). Nangiar Koothu: The Classical Dance-Theatre of the Nangiar-s. *Asian Theatre Journal*, 12(1), 206. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1124481>
- 7) Vivanantharasa, T. (2015). Role of Koothu performance in the process of community building. *Koothu*. <http://repository.kln.ac.lk/xmlui/handle/123456789/13831>
- 8) Wolf, R. K., Troupe, S. K., Troupe, P., Troupe, K., Du Monde, M. D. C., Gründ, F., & Grund, F. (2002). Southern India. Dance dramas: Kathakali, Teru Koothu, Yakshagana. *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 34, 215. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3649210>