



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Kuvalaya-Vilochane: The Dhvani Interpretations Of Śṛṅgāra In Kathakali

**Author:** Dr. Sudeep A Mohan

Assistant Professor Kathakali,

Keralakalamandalam Deemed to be University for Art & Culture

Thrissur, Kerala, India 679531

### Abstract:

Kathakali, the classical dance-drama tradition of Kerala, intricately weaves elements of dance, music, acting, and poetry into a complete aesthetic experience. This paper examines how *śṛṅgāra rasa*—particularly *sambhoga śṛṅgāra* is poetically and dramaturgically realized through *dhvani* in Kathakali performance. Focusing on Unnayi Warriar's *Nalacharitam*, especially the *Kuvalaya-vilochane* poem from the *Nalacharitam* second day's act, the study illustrates the subtle shifts in emotional texture and acting techniques that elevate this text to a paradigmatic example of refined eroticism in Indian theatre. Drawing on Nāṭyaśāstra concepts, historical context, and performative traditions, the paper reveals how *Nalacharitam* redefined narrative, language, and abhinaya in Kathakali, giving *śṛṅgāra* a new artistic gravitas through suggestive dramaturgy.

### Introduction

Kathakali represents an amalgamation of Kerala's cultural, artistic, and theatrical heritage. With its roots in *Ramanattam*, the art form matured over four centuries into a highly codified performance system. Distinctive for its reliance on physical acting (*āṅgikābhinaya*), Kathakali has remained committed to stylization and structure. The genre evolved under the influence of *Koodiyattam*, as well as regional folk traditions such as *Padayani* and *Mudiyettu*. Yet the greatest leap in Kathakali's poetic and emotive sophistication occurred with Unnayi Warriar's *Nalacharitam*—a pioneering work in conveying *śṛṅgāra rasa* through nuanced dramaturgy and suggestive acting.

## ***Śṛṅgāra Rasa and Dhvani in Kathakali***

In Sanskrit dramaturgy, *śṛṅgāra rasa* (the erotic sentiment) is considered the *rasa-rāja*, or the king of all *rasas*. Its maturity is marked not by overt physical expression but by subtle emotional resonance (*dhvani*), experienced through the interplay of physical gesture, poetic language, and actorly restraint. The romantic scenes in Kathakali, particularly *patiñña padas* (slow, lyrical love songs), offer the actor a canvas to explore delicate transitions of mood—*lajjā*, *mārdava*, *visāda*, *rati*, and *āvega*. These *padas* rarely function as expository devices. Instead, they serve as emotive interludes where performance transcends narrative and enters the realm of aesthetic contemplation.

## ***Nalacharitam: A Dramaturgical Breakthrough***

*Nalacharitam*, composed by Unnayi Warriar in the 18th century, centers on the classical *Mahābhārata* story of King Nala and Princess Damayanti. Divided into four days (or acts), it traces a love story through phases of union, separation, and reunion. Unlike earlier *Aattakathas* steeped in *vīra* or *raudra rasa*, Warriar's text exclusively prioritizes *śṛṅgāra* in its purest form—culminating in a rare synthesis of emotional depth, poetic subtlety, and structured *abhinaya*.

## ***The Kuvalaya-vilochane Padam: A Paradigm of Erotic Dhvani***

The second day's opening *pada*, beginning with;

*Kuvalaya-vilochane, bale, bhaimi,*

*Kisalaya-adhare, charu-sheelee...* — presents a scene of conjugal intimacy, just after the protagonists' wedding. Nala addresses Damayanti with awe, reverence, and tenderness. There is no overt display of desire; instead, the words veil the erotic undertone in metaphors of nature and spiritual fulfillment. The use of respectful epithets (e.g., *kuvalaya-vilochane* “lotus-eyed”, *bhaimi* “daughter of Bhima”) elevates the speech to a poetic invocation rather than a direct expression of lust. The beauty of this scene lies in its suggestiveness, not narration. Warriar's brilliance is in offering a passage that demands the highest *sāttvikābhinaya* from the actor—eye movements, nuanced facial expressions, shifts in posture—all tailored to evoke a *rasa* beyond the literal.

## ***Performative Demands: Acting Technique and Rasa Realization***

Renowned Kathakali exponent Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair emphasized that each vocative in the *pada* must correspond to a specific type of *drishti* (gaze). For instance:

- *Bale* demands a shy, tender glance.
- *Bhaimi* requires a heroic yet reverent expression.
- *Kisalaya-adhare* suggests softness blended with sadness.
- *Charu-sheelee* evokes wonder mixed with admiration.

The progression of mood across the *pada* involves controlled physical movement (*aṅgika*), internalized emotion (*sāttvika*), and layered suggestion (*dhvani*). The actor must remain disciplined; even a single lascivious glance or overtly sensual gesture could break the aesthetic sanctity of the scene.

### *Nalacharitam and the Legacy of Śṛṅgāra in Kathakali*

Following Warriar, future *Aattakatha* writers—like Karthika Thirunal—incorporated the structure of beginning with a *śṛṅgāra pada*, a tradition possibly inspired by *Kuvalaya-vilochane*. However, few achieved its depth or refinement. Unlike other Kathakali texts that sometimes feature direct eroticism or explicit dialogue, *Nalacharitam* communicates through restraint, metaphor, and poetic suggestion. The *rasa* is not stated, but evoked—a quintessential manifestation of *dhvani* theory as articulated by Ānandavardhana.

### *Conclusion*

*Nalacharitam* remains an unmatched gem in Kathakali literature and performance—a love story that traverses the human spectrum of desire, loss, and reconciliation. Through *Kuvalaya-vilochane*, Warriar demonstrates how a highly stylized theatrical form can embody the most tender of human emotions without transgressing its own formal aesthetics. The scene offers a template for understanding *śṛṅgāra* not as mere romantic expression, but as a profound aesthetic experience grounded in poetic suggestion and performative subtlety.

In Kathakali, gesture (*aṅgya*) births suggestion (*vyangya*). And it is through this language of the body—discipline, nuance, and intention—that *rasa* truly unfolds.

"Where the meaning touches the heart, there *rasa* is born.

It spreads through the body like fire through dry wood." (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bharata)

**Keywords:** Kathakali, Śṛṅgāra Rasa, Dhvani, Unnayi Warriar, Nalacharitam, Aattakatha, Classical Indian Theatre, Abhinaya, Sanskrit Poetics