

Canon, Gender, and the Devadasi Tradition: A Comparative Study of Kshetrappa's Padam and Muddupalani's Rādhikāsāntvanam

Ms. Riddhima Seth

Ph.D Research Scholar at Department of Indian Languages & Literary Studies, University of Delhi.
rseth.phd@mil.du.ac.in

Abstract: This paper is a comparative study of Kshetrappa's *padam* and Muddupalani's *Radhika Santawanam*, two prominent works of Telugu literature within the oft overlooked devadasi tradition of pre-colonial south India. Like many bhakti poems of ancient India, both the poets blur the distinction between sensual and sacred by employing the Radha-Krishna paradigm in their devotion. Even though their works are considerably different in poetic structure, form and representation of erotic elements differ considerably in literary form, representation of desire, and authorial perspective, the texts converge in their treatment of Śṛṅgāra Rasa. Through a study of selected padams and episodes from *Radhika Santawanam*, the paper explores how Kshetrappa's lyrical compositions and Muddupalani's narrative kāvya construct feminine subjectivity, erotic agency, and devotional intimacy. Significant attention is given to authorship, text reception and the treatment of erotic consciousness in both the texts. Through this literary analysis the study aims to address the questions of gender, cultural legitimacy, and power that influenced the preservation, marginalization, and interpretation of Telugu literary traditions.

Key Words: Devadasi Tradition, Telugu Literature, Śṛṅgāra Rasa, comparative study, Pre-colonial South India.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pre-colonial Indian literary traditions are known to resist rigid distinctions between the sacred and the sensual. Be it the concept of *rasa* in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* or the devotional Bhakti tradition reflecting in *Akam-Puram* Sangam poetry. Erotic desire (*śṛṅgāra*) has often been an epicenter of divine-aesthetic poetic heritage of India. This confluence of devotion and desire finds particularly rich expression in the works of Kshetrappa (c. seventeenth century) and Muddupalani (c. eighteenth century), two poets who became primary landmarks of the vibrant Telugu Literature centering scantily talked about devadasi traditions. While Kshetrappa's celebrated padams, composed in praise of Muvva Gopala, became integral to the repertoires of Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi, Muddupalani's *Radhika Santawanam* expanded the possibilities of śṛṅgāra by presenting female desire with remarkable candour, emotional depth, and literary sophistication.¹

Both writers emerged from closely related socio-cultural worlds and drew upon the shared aesthetic vocabulary of Krishna bhakti and erotic devotion, but the reception of their works diverged dramatically in the colonial period. Kshetrappa's compositions were absorbed into the canon of classical music and dance, while *Radhika Santawanam* became the subject of censorship, controversy, and moral condemnation. Muddupalani's impeccable kavyaprabandhan could see the light of the day when Bangalore's Nagarathanamma republished it in 1910 in Telugu, it however raised

¹ A. K. Ramanujan, Velcheru Narayana Rao, and David Shulman, eds. and trans., *When God Is a Customer: Telugu Courtesan Songs by Kshetrappa and Others* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Muddupalani, *The Appeasement of Radhika*, trans. Sandhya Mulchandani (New Delhi: Penguin Classics, 2011).

many eyebrows again.² The controversy surrounding the text raises important questions about who is permitted to speak of desire, whose sexuality is considered aesthetically legitimate, and how literary value is shaped by structures of power.

This paper undertakes a comparative study of Kshetrappa's padams and Muddupalani's *Radhika Santawanam* through the lens of śṛṅgāra rasa, gendered authorship, and reception history. By examining their literary forms, representations of feminine subjectivity, and contrasting trajectories of canonization and censorship, the study argues that the difference in their reception was not rooted in erotic content alone. Rather, it emerged from the politics of authorship and the changing moral frameworks imposed by colonial modernity. In doing so, the paper seeks to illuminate how the same aesthetic tradition that celebrated erotic devotion could simultaneously marginalize a woman's articulation of desire, thereby revealing the gendered dynamics that continue to shape literary memory and cultural legitimacy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with Telugu Sringara poetry has expanded considerably over the past few years, yet the intersection of gender, authorship, and aesthetic legitimacy within the canon remains underexamined. The existing body of work is individually dedicated to the works of select poets whose canonical fates are however divergent but they share the same institutional problem.

The prime source for Kshetrappa's composition remains Ramanujan, Narayana Rao, and Shulman's landmark translated anthology, which situates the padams within the Telugu courtesan-song tradition and draws attention to the erotic-devotional entanglement central to the genre.³ The editors' note the works as *madhurabhakti* (a spiritual-love poetry where God is lover or beloved). Narayana Rao and Shulman's later anthology of classical Telugu poetry extends this institutional reading of the tradition, though again without sustained attention to gender as a category of authorship.⁴

The most significant intervention in recent years comes from Kamath, whose work challenges the long-standing assumption of Kshetrappa's singular male authorship, raising the possibility that the padams emerged from a broader Devadasi compositional culture before being attributed to a male name.⁵ This finding, still underutilised in comparative studies, is central to the present paper's argument.

For Muddupalani, critical attention has been shaped largely by recovery scholarship. Tharu and Lalita's inclusion of the poet in their anthology of women's writing in India provided the first sustained academic framing of her work in English, situating the 1911 ban within a broader politics of colonial moral reform.⁶ Pollock's theoretical work on rasa provides the aesthetic vocabulary through which both poets can be read against the same classical framework.⁷

What remains absent from this scholarship is a direct comparative analysis that holds both poets simultaneously, reading their divergent fates not as biographical accidents but as symptoms of how the Telugu literary institution managed the problem of female authorship.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative textual analysis of Kshetrappa's padams and Muddupalani's *Rādhikāsāntvanam* within the shared framework of the Telugu *devadasi* tradition. Drawing primarily on close reading and a comparative study of the select texts. The paper examines the texts on five edges; voice and authorship, the representation of Krishna,

² K. Srilata, "Radical Radhas: Bangalore Nagarathnamma and Muddupalani Celebrated Female Desire through *Radhika Santawanam*," *The Hindu*, 8 July 2022; Sandhya Mulchandani, introduction to *The Appeasement of Radhika*, xiii–xxiv.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Harshita Mruthinti Kamath, "Kṣetrappa: The Making of a Telugu Poet," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 56, no. 3 (2019): 285–318. See also her monograph *Impersonations: The Artifice of Brahmin Masculinity in South Indian Dance* (University of California Press, 2019) for the broader institutional argument.

⁶ Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, eds., *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, vol. 1 (The Feminist Press, 1991). The headnote to the Muddupalani section provides the most concise account of the censorship history available in English.

⁷ Sheldon Pollock, ed. and trans., *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics* (Columbia University Press, 2016). Particularly relevant are the introduction and the translated sections from Abhinavagupta's *Locana*.

the manifestation of Sringara rasa in line with the poems' structure and form, the impact of colonial literary reform, and the politics of canonical attribution. The study is grounded in classical Indian aesthetic theory, particularly Abhinavagupta's theorisation of rasa and the sahrdaya, and situates both poets within the socio-institutional context of the Thanjavur Devadasi court culture. Where relevant, the analysis draws on postcolonial and gender-inflected historiography to account for the role of colonial reform movements in reshaping Telugu literary canonisation. The methodology is deliberately non-prescriptive, it does not seek to argue advocacy but to trace an institutional pattern visible only when both texts are read simultaneously against each other

4. THE DEVADASI TRADITION AND THE MAKING OF THE TELUGU LITERARY CANON

Devadasi, literally means "servant of God"⁸, was among the most sophisticated cultural structures of premodern South India, and it is impossible to understand either Kshetrappa or Muddupalani without understanding the world it created. Devadasis were women ritually dedicated to temple deities, trained from childhood in music, dance, Sanskrit, and vernacular poetics, and attached to both major temple establishments and royal courts across the subcontinent. The great Chola temples of Thanjavur, Chidambaram, and Tirupati maintained large communities of such women; inscriptions from the Brihadeeswara temple at Thanjavur, built by Rajaraja I in the eleventh century, record the names of four hundred Devadasi performers attached to the temple alone.⁹ These women occupied a position of considerable social authority: they were among the few women in premodern India who could own property, conduct financial transactions independently, and move freely in intellectual and artistic circles otherwise closed to women of the domestic sphere. The padam tradition — the short musical and poetic form at the centre of this study — was fundamentally their creation. As Ramanujan, Narayana Rao, and Shulman establish, padams "originally belonged to the professional caste of dancers and singers, devadasis or veyyas, who were associated with both temples and royal courts in late medieval South India."¹⁰ Devadasi was not merely a performer of this literature; she was its primary custodian, theorist, and in many cases its composer. Her training encompassed not just technical proficiency but the full repertoire of classical aesthetic theory — the nine rasas, the conventions of nayaka-nayika typology, the Sanskrit poetic figures of alamkara — making her, in effect, the living institution through which the erotic-devotional tradition was transmitted and renewed across generations. It is in this context that the Thanjavur court of the eighteenth century, described by Tharu and Lalita as representing "the golden age of Telugu literature" where "music, dance, and literature flourished, as did painting and sculpture," must be understood, not as an anomaly but as the fullest expression of an institutional culture centuries in the making.¹¹

It is within this living tradition that both Kshetrappa and Muddupalani found their voices, though the nature of that inheritance was radically different for each. Kshetrappa, composing in the mid-seventeenth century Thanjavur and Madurai courts, wrote padams that were performed by Devadasi women — his poems inhabited the courtesan's world as subject matter while remaining authored from the outside. His padams gave voice to the world of the professional performer: the madam advising a younger courtesan, the woman demanding payment, the lover's quarrel conducted in the language of divine devotion. In one characteristic poem the senior courtesan addresses a younger colleague:

"Woman! He's none other

than Cennudu of Palagiri.

Haven't you heard?

He rules the worlds.

When he wanted you, you took his gold

⁸ Ramanujan, Narayana Rao, and Shulman, *When God Is a Customer*, 1

⁹ Leslie C. Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 5–7. Orr's study of epigraphic evidence from the Chola temples remains the most comprehensive account of the Devadasi institution's institutional scale in this period.

¹⁰ Ramanujan, Narayana Rao, and Shulman, *When God Is a Customer*, 1

¹¹ Tharu, Susie, and K. Lalita (eds.) *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present, Volume I: 600 B.C. to the Early Twentieth Century* The Feminist Press at the City University of New York New York 1991, 1st edition p. 5 ISBN: 978-1-55861-027-9

but couldn't you tell him your address?"¹²

The Devadasi world has its hierarchies, its economics, its negotiations of desire — is rendered with intimacy and precision. But Kshetrappa renders it from the position of the composer looking in, giving these women a voice rather than speaking as one of them. Muddupalani, by contrast, composed from inside the institution. A Devadasi at the court of Pratapasimha of Thanjavur (r. 1739–1763), she was "accomplished in music and classical dance," owned property, and enjoyed "functional equality with men" of her class.⁵ Most strikingly, she wrote from a position of acknowledged artistic authority that very few women of any period had claimed so openly. In the prologue to *Rādhikāsāntvanamu* — a prologue deliberately excised by the 1887 editor Venkatanarasu — she inscribed herself into the literary tradition with a directness that has no parallel in the Telugu canon,

"Which other woman of my kind has felicitated scholars with gifts and money?

To which other woman of my kind have epics been dedicated?

Which other woman of my kind has won such acclaim in each of the arts?

You are incomparable, Muddupalani, among your kind."¹³

This was not vanity but precision: Tharu and Lalita note that "it was not customary for male artists to dedicate their writing to a woman mentor, but Muddupalani records with pride that several works had been dedicated to her."¹⁴ The Devadasi tradition had made her literacy, her patronage, and her artistic authority possible. What it could not protect her from was what came next.

The world that sustained both Kshetrappa and Muddupalani was dismantled with extraordinary thoroughness by colonial restructuring and the reform movements it empowered. By 1799, all revenues from the Thanjavur kingdom had passed to the British, and "poets, musicians, architects, scientists, indeed scholars and artists of all kinds who depended on the patronage of the courts were deprived of a means of sustenance."¹⁵ The economic collapse of court patronage was followed by an ideological campaign that reframed the Devadasi not as a cultivated artist but as a moral threat. Colonial administrators and political thinkers, Thomas Macaulay, John Stuart Mill, and Charles Trevelyan among them — were agreed on the need to reshape Indian subjects through carefully selected literary curricula, and Indian erotic-devotional literature had no place in that project.¹⁶ Orientalist scholarship performed a complementary operation: it retrieved and canonised a brahminic, ascetic, Vedic past while marginalising the secular, vernacular, and openly erotic traditions that had flourished in the courts. When C. P. Brown's associate Venkatanarasu reprinted *Rādhikāsāntvanamu* in 1887, he excised not only verses he deemed sexually explicit but also the *peetika*, the colophon in which Muddupalani "traced her female lineage and spoke with confidence, unusual for later times, about her achievement as an artist."¹⁷ The erasure was therefore not merely of eroticism but of female authorial self-inscription. Then in 1911, Police Commissioner Cunningham seized all copies of Nagaratnamma's restored 1910 edition, and the British government charged her publishers under Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code with producing an obscene book. Kandukuri Veeresalingam, the very reformer who had called Muddupalani "an adulteress" born into "a community of prostitutes" — had already supplied the ideological groundwork.¹¹ The same reform movement left Kshetrappa entirely untouched, his padams repackaged as devotional allegory and their composer retrospectively sainted. Tharu and Lalita describe the outcome precisely: the book was eventually unbanned in 1947, but by the late twentieth century "Radhika Santawanam had been decreed out of existence ideologically"¹⁸ — critic after critic condemning a work most had never read. The asymmetry was total. What colonialism and reform together could not achieve with Kshetrappa, because he was male, and could be made respectable — they achieved completely with Muddupalani, because she was not.

¹² Kshetrappa, "Padam 176," in *When God Is a Customer*, 63.

¹³ Muddupalani, *The Appeasement of Radhika*, trans. Mulchandani, 23.

¹⁴ Tharu and Lalita, *Women Writing in India*, vol. 1, 5.

¹⁵ Tharu and Lalita, *Women Writing in India*, vol. 1, 7.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 9.

¹⁸ Ibid.

5. FORM AND STRUCTURE OF PADAMS

Both Kshetrappa and Muddupalani belong to the rich Telugu śṛṅgāra-bhakti tradition that flourished between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the courts and devadasi cultures of South India. Kshetrappa, writing in the mid-seventeenth century under the Nayaka courts of Madurai and Thanjavur, composed erotic-devotional *padams* dedicated to “Muvva Gopala,” many of which later became central to the repertoires of Kuchipudi and Bharatanatyam¹⁹. Muddupalani, writing in the eighteenth century at the Maratha court of Thanjavur under King Pratapsimha, extended this erotic-devotional tradition through her *Radhika Santawanam*, a *śṛṅgāra-prabandham* remarkable for its unapologetic articulation of female desire²⁰. While Kshetrappa adopted the feminine voice to express longing, jealousy, erotic play, and divine intimacy, Muddupalani transformed the genre by allowing women themselves to speak, instruct, desire, and remember through an embodied feminine consciousness.

The poetry of Kshetrappa is structurally rooted in the *padam* tradition, consisting of a *pallavi* (refrain), *anupallavi*, and multiple *charanams*, designed not merely for reading but for musical and performative enactment. As the editors of *When God is a Customer* observe, these songs were “intended to be sung and, often, danced,”²¹ primarily by devadasis attached to temples and royal courts. His works blur the distinction between bhakti and eroticism, presenting Krishna simultaneously as deity and lover. In one celebrated *padam*, the female speaker teasingly complains:

“Still you come rushing
through the streets,
sly as a thief,
to untie my blouse.”²²

Elsewhere, the inversion of devotional hierarchy becomes strikingly evident:

“God himself has come as a customer
to this young woman.”²³

Here, the divine male is rendered vulnerable before the courtesan, revealing the sophisticated emotional politics embedded within Telugu courtly eroticism. Kshetrappa’s women are articulate, sarcastic, emotionally intelligent, and sexually expressive; however, these voices remain mediated through male authorship.

Muddupalani’s *Radhika Santawanam*, by contrast, intensifies and interiorizes feminine erotic experience. Structurally, the text follows the conventions of the Telugu *śṛṅgāra prabandham*—beginning with invocations, genealogies, and praise of patrons before unfolding into an extended erotic narrative divided into four sections. Yet the emotional architecture of the work is radically different from Kshetrappa’s lyrical fragments. Muddupalani develops sustained psychological movement: desire, initiation, jealousy, separation, rage, appeasement, and reunion. Unlike Kshetrappa’s episodic *padams*, her narrative traces the evolution of female sexuality from adolescence to mature erotic consciousness.

Particularly significant is Muddupalani’s experimentation with the *saptapadam* form, seven-line verses that demonstrate both lyrical innovation and aesthetic sophistication. The text explicitly records that she “introduced novel elements experimenting with seven line verses called *saptapadam*, for which she was rewarded.” The *saptapadam* becomes especially effective in expressing layered emotional transitions and intimate corporeal detail. Rather than functioning merely as decorative eroticism, these verses dramatize the emotional intelligence of women navigating love and sexual awakening.

Muddupalani’s handling of Ila’s puberty and erotic initiation is particularly groundbreaking. The female body is neither metaphorically erased nor morally restrained. Instead, desire is spoken openly through female voices:

¹⁹ Ramanujan, Narayana Rao, and Shulman, *When God Is a Customer*, 1–5.

²⁰ Muddupalani, *The Appeasement of Radhika*, trans. Mulchandani, xiii–xxiv.

²¹ Ramanujan, Narayana Rao, and Shulman, *When God Is a Customer*, 14–18.

²² *ibid.*, 17–18.

²³ *ibid.*

When Radha would offer her bountiful breasts
To the slayer of demons,
Ila would lament: 'But I have none!'"²⁴

The child's playful envy gradually transforms into erotic consciousness. Later, Radha herself instructs Ila regarding conjugal intimacy, effectively placing feminine knowledge transmission at the center of the text. Such scenes radically depart from conventional patriarchal literary frameworks where women remain objects rather than interpreters of desire.

Muddupalani further destabilizes devotional convention through explicit depictions of female pleasure and sexual reciprocity:

"As he pressed his lips against hers,
She responded fervently."²⁵

and

"they indulged
Exploring pleasure
Different postures, differing styles"

These lines reveal that sexuality in *Radhika Santawanam* is mutual, exploratory, and emotionally textured rather than merely ornamental. The female protagonists initiate intimacy, express dissatisfaction, demand gratification, and even physically reject Krishna. In one striking episode, the enraged Radha kicks Krishna away during reconciliation, reversing conventional gendered power relations.

6. REPRESENTATION OF KRISHNA IN KSHETRAYYA AND MUDDUPALANI'S WORKS

At the outset, the divine Krishna is unambiguously central to both poets. In Kshetrayya's padams, he is addressed as 'Muvva Gopala', the Cowherd of the Jingling Bells; a name that carries both intimate familiarity and cosmological weight simultaneously. In padam 176, even as the senior courtesan scolds a younger colleague for her negligence, she cannot frame the reproach without the refrain: "He rules the worlds."²⁶ The name and the sovereign claim are inseparable. In *Rādhikāsāntvanamu*, Muddupalani too addresses Krishna through a range of devotional epithets — Hari, Madhava, Murari; names drawn from the Vaishnava theological tradition that identify him as the preserver, the destroyer of demons, the consort of Lakshmi.²⁷ The surface of both poetic worlds is therefore identical: the same deity, the same mythological inheritance, the same honorific vocabulary. What diverges fundamentally is the structural position this deity occupies within each poem's emotional and epistemological architecture. It is this divergence, invisible at the level of nomenclature but decisive at the level of form, that this section examines.

In Kshetrayya's formal economy, Krishna's sovereignty is not merely asserted but structurally engineered into the poem through the device of the recurring refrain. The mudra, the divine signature embedded in each padam, functions as a theological anchor that prevents the poem's erotic or transactional content from fully displacing the god's cosmic authority. In padam 37, the courtesan waits through the night unable to sleep, knowing he has gone elsewhere;

waiting for my man.

What's the point now of these ornaments,

all these flowers?

Who will see this beauty?

²⁴Muddupalani, *The Appeasement of Radhika*, trans. Mulchandani 22.

²⁵ ibid.

²⁶ Kshetrayya, "Padam 176," in *When God Is a Customer*, 63.

²⁷ Muddupalani, *The Appeasement of Radhika*, trans. Mulchandani.

He's not to be trusted,
this Muvva Gopala,
who has ruled in my bed.²⁸

In padam 9, even as she embraces him she knows he sighs for another woman, yet she neither leaves nor ceases to desire.

When, in making love,
I embrace Muvva Gopala,
who sighs and sighs for that other woman,
Is it him or is it me?²⁹

This is the structural logic of Kshetrappa's Krishna: his betrayal does not diminish his desirability but confirms it. The asymmetry between the woman's total emotional exposure and the god's sovereign freedom is not a flaw in the devotional relationship, it is its defining condition, inherited directly from the Tamil bhakti model of viraha in which the devotee's anguish is itself the measure of the divine's magnitude. The courtesan in these poems is always oriented toward Krishna; he is the fixed point around which her desire, her anger, her longing, and her submission continuously revolve. Even the poems that seem to give her the upper hand, demanding payment, refusing entry, scolding him for infidelity, restore his centrality through the refrain. The formal architecture and the theological claim are inseparable.

In *Rādhikāsāntvanamu*, Muddupalani deploys the same honorific names for the same deity within the same mythological frame, and quietly, systematically empties them of their structural function. Krishna is addressed as Hari and Madhava, but in Muddupalani's poem these names do not anchor a cosmological hierarchy; they are terms of address within a situation that Radha, not Krishna, governs. The poem's central action Radha mentoring Ila Devi in the arts of love, counselling Krishna in tenderness, managing the emotional consequences of a triangular relationship she herself has structured places knowledge rather than desire at the poem's centre.³⁰ This is a formal transformation of the first order. In the Telugu Sringara tradition as Kshetrappa inherits and transmits it, bodily knowledge of Krishna is the devotee's aspiration the thing reached toward across the distance of viraha. In Muddupalani's poem, that knowledge is already possessed, and it is possessed by the woman. Krishna is not the cause of longing but the object of expertise. Where Kshetrappa's nayika desires and waits, Muddupalani's Radha knows and instructs and the difference between these two postures is the difference between a tradition that places the divine at its centre and one that has, with great formal subtlety, moved the woman there instead. As Tharu and Lalita observe, in *Rādhikāsāntvanamu* "the woman's sensuality is central" and "it is her satisfaction or pleasure that provides the poetic resolution" a reversal of the genre's foundational premise that no amount of theological nomenclature can disguise.³¹ The names Hari and Murari remain; what they name, in Muddupalani's poem, is a figure who has been loved enough to be taught.

What this comparison ultimately reveals is not a difference of devotion but a difference of architecture. Kshetrappa builds a poem in which the divine, however teased and scolded, always reclaims the centre; Muddupalani builds one in which the centre has already, quietly, been taken by the woman who knows him best. It is the same Krishna, and an entirely different world.

7. REPRESENTATIONS OF ŚṚṄĀRA IN KSHETRAPPY AND MUDDUPALANI

Śṛṅgāra, the rasa of erotic love occupies the first and most exalted position in Bharata Muni's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the foundational treatise of Indian aesthetic theory, where it is described as the sovereign among rasas, the one from which

²⁸ Kshetrappa, "Padam 37," in *When God Is a Customer*, 81.

²⁹ Ibid., 101

³⁰ Muddupalani, *The Appeasement of Radhika*, trans. Mulchandani, 37.

³¹ Tharu and Lalita, *Women Writing in India*, vol. 1, 6.

all other emotional flavours derive their intensity and colour.³² Bharata identifies two constituent states within Śṛṅgāra: *sambhoga*, the rasa of union, and *vipralambha*, the rasa of separation and longing; it is within this classical binary that both Kṣetrayya and Muddupalani compose.³³ Both poets inherit the same theological and aesthetic framework: the Rādhā-Krishna paradigm, the Madhurabhakti tradition, and the insistence that sexuality and spirituality are not opposed but structurally entangled. Neither separates the erotic from the sacred. Both place women at the emotional centre of the poem, both emerge from the courtly Devadasi culture of Thanjavur, and both understand desire as something experienced through and by the body rather than abstracted into metaphysical allegory. This shared ground is significant as it confirms that the differences between them are not differences of tradition or genre but of something far more fundamental: who is generating the rasa, from whose body, and to what end.

Within this shared inheritance, however, the two poets construct Śṛṅgāra in ways that are formally and philosophically irreconcilable. Kṣetrayya's Śṛṅgāra is episodic and momentary — each padam captures a single emotional state, a flash of jealousy, longing, or recrimination, distilled and then released. In padam 37, the nāyikā's waiting is rendered in a single sustained image:

It's so late.

He's not coming, no way.

The whole village is fast asleep³⁴

vipralambha-Śṛṅgāra at its most concentrated, desire frozen at the moment of its frustration. The rasa here is generated through dhvani, (suggestion) and is intended to be completed by the sahrdaya, the sensitive reader or listener, outside the poem. Kṣetrayya's Śṛṅgāra is, in this sense, always instrumental: it points upward toward Madhurabhakti, the devotee's longing for God, and the erotic is its vehicle rather than its destination. In Muddupalani, Śṛṅgāra operates entirely differently. The poem's emotional architecture is narrative and developmental, the rasa evolves across the entire text, accumulating psychological weight rather than crystallising in isolated lyric moments. Where Kṣetrayya's nāyikā represents erotic subjectivity, Muddupalani's Rādhā experiences it — and the distance between these two conditions, as Tharu and Lalita observe, is the distance between a female voice imagined by a male poet and a female voice articulated by a woman.³⁵

The most consequential divergence lies in what Śṛṅgāra is allowed to resolve into. In Kṣetrayya's padams, the rasa cycle almost always completes itself, the union is intimated if not fully achieved, and the erotic charge finds release. In Muddupalani's poem, Rādhā's Śṛṅgāra refuses resolution. She teaches, she enables the union of Krishna and Ilā Devī, she transmits erotic knowledge with precision and authority, but the fulfilment she orchestrates belongs to someone else. Her Śṛṅgāra is therefore not vipralambha in the classical sense, for she is not separated from Krishna by distance or indifference; she is displaced by a situation she herself has sanctioned. The poem occupies an emotional register the *Nāṭyaśāstra* does not name: erotic expertise without erotic completion, desire converted entirely into knowledge and then given away. This is Muddupalani's most radical formal achievement — not that she wrote eroticism as a woman, but that she created a Śṛṅgāra that the tradition's own aesthetic categories cannot fully contain.³⁶

Colonial Censorship and the Reception of Śṛṅgāra Literature

The advent of colonial rule brought profound changes to the reception of Indian literary traditions, particularly texts dealing with sexuality and eroticism. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Victorian moral values increasingly influenced colonial administrative policies as well as emerging Indian middle-class notions of

³² Bharata Muni, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, trans. and ed. Adya Rangacharya (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1996), 54–56. Bharata designates Śṛṅgāra as *śṛṅgāra-rasa-pradhāna* — the foremost among all rasas — grounding it in the permanent emotional state (*sthāyibhāva*) of love (*rati*).

³³ Ibid., 57

³⁴ Kṣetrayya, “Padam 37,” in *When God Is a Customer*, 81.

³⁵ Tharu and Lalita, *Women Writing in India*, vol. 1, 6.

³⁶ Muddupalani, *The Appeasement of Radhika*, trans. Mulchandani, 27–45. The passages in which Rādhā instructs Ilā Devī and counsels Krishna collectively constitute a form of Śṛṅgāra that operates outside both sambhoga and vipralambha, a third emotional register for which the classical taxonomy provides no category.

respectability. Through legal instruments such as Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code (1860), literary works could be prosecuted on grounds of obscenity, leading to the suppression of several texts that had long circulated within indigenous aesthetic traditions. Works rooted in śṛṅgāra, courtesan culture, and devotional eroticism came under particular scrutiny as colonial authorities sought to impose European standards of morality upon Indian cultural production. This process not only altered literary tastes but also contributed to the gradual marginalization of performance traditions associated with devadasis and courtesans. The censorship of erotic literature thus represented not merely the regulation of texts but also the restructuring of cultural memory and the delegitimization of alternative modes of expressing desire and femininity.³⁷

The fate of Muddupalani's *Radhika Santawanam* exemplifies this transformation. Though the work had enjoyed literary recognition in earlier centuries, its complete republication by Bangalore Nagarathnamma in 1911 provoked intense criticism and ultimately led to its prohibition. Contemporary critics repeatedly dismissed both author and editor as "prostitutes," reducing their literary achievements to questions of sexual morality rather than aesthetic merit.³⁸ The colonial government translator declared the text obscene, and a work celebrated for its poetic sophistication was almost overnight transformed into a symbol of moral transgression.³⁹ What particularly unsettled colonial and nationalist sensibilities was not merely the presence of eroticism but Muddupalani's unapologetic representation of female desire. In *Radhika Santawanam*, Radha instructs Ila in matters of sexuality, expresses jealousy, demands emotional fulfilment, and openly articulates bodily pleasure. Such representations challenged emerging ideals of the modest, domesticated, and sexually restrained woman that both colonial administrators and Indian social reformers increasingly sought to promote.⁴⁰

A comparison with Kshetrappa reveals the gendered nature of this censorship. Like Muddupalani, Kshetrappa emerged from the cultural milieu of South Indian courtly and devadasi traditions, and his padams are equally charged with erotic imagery. His compositions, many of which became integral to Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi repertoires, portray women longing for, teasing, and physically desiring Krishna. Yet Kshetrappa was absorbed into the literary and classical canon, while Muddupalani was condemned. The distinction lay less in the content of their works than in the position from which desire was articulated. Kshetrappa's female voices were mediated through male authorship and could therefore be interpreted as aesthetic, devotional, or symbolic. Muddupalani, however, spoke as a woman and granted women erotic agency, authority, and subjectivity. As Bangalore Nagarathnamma famously argued, male poets who wrote explicitly about sexuality were celebrated, whereas a woman expressing similar sentiments was denounced as immodest. The censorship of *Radhika Santawanam* thus reveals the convergence of colonial morality, patriarchal literary standards, and the stigmatization of devadasi culture, exposing how gender fundamentally shaped the reception of śṛṅgāra literature in modern India.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the divergent canonical fates of Kṣetrappa and Muddupalani cannot be attributed to differences of aesthetic quality, genre, or literary tradition. Both poets composed within the same Devadasi institutional world, the same Thanjavur court culture, the same Rādhā-Krishna mythological framework, and the same Śṛṅgāra rasa tradition. What separated them was neither craft nor content but the body from which each composed, and the institutional response that body provoked. Kṣetrappa's female voices, mediated through male authorship, could be spiritualised, canonised, and absorbed; Muddupalani's, authored from within lived feminine experience, could only be suppressed. The comparative reading undertaken here reveals that Kṣetrappa's Krishna always reclaims cosmic sovereignty through the refrain, his Śṛṅgāra always resolves upward toward devotion, and his nāyikā always represents rather than possesses erotic subjectivity. Muddupalani dismantles each of these structures from the inside — decentring the divine, refusing resolution, and converting desire into knowledge. That the Telugu literary tradition could accommodate one and not the other is not a historical accident. It is a precise institutional record of how canons are

³⁷ Ibid., xiii–xxiv.

³⁸ K. Srilata, "Radical Radhas: Bangalore Nagarathnamma and Muddupalani Celebrated Female Desire through *Radhika Santawanam*," *The Hindu*, 8 July 2022.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Manu S. Pillai, "Muddupalani, the Woman Who Had No Reason for Shame," *The Hindu*, 2 June 2018.

built, who they protect, and what they cannot afford to name. What remains, when both poets are finally read together, is not merely a comparative study but a question the tradition has yet to fully answer.

REFERENCES

1. Kshetrappa. *When God Is a Customer: Telugu Courtesan Songs by Kshetrappa and Others*. Edited and translated by A. K. Ramanujan, Velcheru Narayana Rao, and David Shulman, University of California Press, 1994.
2. Kodidala, Sai Priya. (2020). An Early 20th Century Tale of Censorship: How Bangalore Nagarathnamma Fought Social Norms to Revive the Legacy of Muddupalani. *Firstpost*, 22 March 2020. Accessed 1 June 2026.
3. Muddupalani. *The Appeasement of Radhika*. Translated by Sandhya Mulchandani, Penguin Classics India, 2011.
4. Mulchandani, Sandhya. (2011). Introduction. In Muddupalani, *The Appeasement of Radhika* (pp. xiii–xxiv). Penguin Classics India.
5. Pillai, Manu S. (2018). Muddupalani: The Woman Who Had No Reason for Shame. *The Hindu*, 3 June 2018. Accessed 1 June 2026.
6. Soneji, Daves. *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.
7. Srilata, K. (2022). Radical Radhas: Bangalore Nagarathnamma and Muddupalani Celebrated Female Desire through *Radhika Santawanam*. *The Hindu Magazine*, 10 July 2022. Accessed 1 June 2026.
8. Tharu, Susie, and K. Lalita (Eds.). *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*. Vol. 1, The Feminist Press, 1991.
9. Venkatachalapathy, A. R. (Ed.). *In Those Days There Was No Coffee: Writings in Cultural History*. Yoda Press, 2007.