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A Thirukkural-Based Reading of Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls* : Conquering Adversity through Ethical Resilience

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Abstract

Laurie Halse Anderson's Wintergirls depicts the life of Lia Marrigan Overbrook who struggles with psychological disorder, grief, and isolation. Lia initially associates strength with an empty body and strict self-control. Lia learns to focus on staying alive with good health and accepting help from others when she begins to recover from her pathetic condtition. This paper reads her journey alongside the Thirukkural, the ethical work of the Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar. It focuses on the chapter on conquering adversity and its teachings about courage, patience, and steady effort during hardship. Lia's decision to live offers a point of comparison with these teachings. Her recovery takes time and involves medical care, family therapy, and a growing willingness to speak honestly. She begins to rebuild relationships and take an active part in her treatment. The paper examines how the purpose of determination matters as much as its strength through the idea of Vinai-thitpam, or firmness in action. Lia's gradual return to family life and emotional openness showcases the resilience built through continued effort and support. This reading connects her recovery with the Thirukkural's concern for sustaining hope during suffering without treating illness as a moral failure or recovery as a matter of willpower alone.

Keywords: Resilience, Adversity, Vinai-thitpam, Recovery, Hope, Thirukkural.

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Introduction

Literature can help readers understand how an eating disorder affects a person's thoughts, relationships, and sense of self. In *Wintergirls* (2009), food restriction and fear of weight gain become part of Lia's daily struggle. The novel gives readers access to feelings and conflicts that a description of symptoms may leave unexplored. Through Lia's voice, it examines the grief, social pressures, and self-doubt that accompany her illness.

Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls* follows Lia Marrigan Overbrook, an eighteen-year-old girl living with anorexia nervosa. "Anorexia nervosa is a serious mental disorder which predominantly affects women (95% of the cases), and has a mortality rate as high as 5-10 percent. The concentration of anorexia nervosa among such specific factors as: sex, social class, age, and cultural values, suggests that sociocultural conditions may be related to the expression of the disease" (Romeo 71). Haunted by the recent death of her best friend Cassie, Lia struggles with guilt, hallucinations, self-starvation, and isolation. Anderson uses crossed-out words, broken sentences, imagery, and inner monologue to show the conflict in Lia's thoughts. Recovery is painful and uncertain. It involves treatment, renewed relationships, and the difficult work of accepting care.

Feminist criticism, body politics, trauma theory, and the medical humanities offer useful ways to read *Wintergirls*. "Women are disempowered and marginalized by these images, and it is important to explore the existence and prevalence of these images in order to examine their effects on women's development" (Hammer 202). These approaches draw attention to beauty standards, body dissatisfaction, grief, and the experience of illness. This paper adds a comparative ethical reading, focusing on how Lia's recovery can be understood through a Tamil philosophical tradition.

Objectives and Aim

The research article examines *Wintergirls* alongside the *Thirukkural*, a work by the Tamil poet and philosopher Thiruvalluvar. Its 1,330 couplets address questions of conduct, responsibility, love, and daily life. Teachings on perseverance, self-control, compassion, and wisdom are especially relevant to this discussion. The chapter Idukkan Azhiyamai ("Conquering Adversity," Couplets 621–630) provides the main focus because it considers how people can face hardship without abandoning their purpose.

The Thirukkural treats adversity as part of human life and encourages steadiness during difficult times. Vinai-thitpam, or firmness in action, offers a way to examine the purpose behind one's effort. In *Wintergirls*, Lia follows strict rules that keep her trapped in harmful behavior. As recovery progresses, she begins to put her effort into accepting care and staying alive. The comparison concerns this change in direction, while recognizing that her recovery also depends on treatment and support.

Reading *Wintergirls* alongside the *Thirukkural* brings attention to Lia's growing ability to take part in her recovery. Her choices become a focus for ethical reflection within the wider experience of illness. The comparison follows her efforts to hold on to hope, seek help, continue treatment, and accept difficult feelings. These moments can be read in relation to Thiruvalluvar's teachings about facing adversity.

This study brings classical Tamil philosophy into conversation with contemporary young adult fiction. Despite their different historical and cultural settings, the two works invite reflection on how people continue through suffering. Lia's final declaration, 'I am thawing', expresses a gradual return to life and connection. In this context, it also suggests that resilience develops through continued effort rather than a single moment of change.

This article argues that Lia's recovery can be read alongside Thiruvalluvar's teachings on conquering adversity. Her journey shows how her understanding of strength changes and how she applies effort. The comparison offers one way to explore psychological suffering and recovery through classical Tamil thought.

Theoretical Framework for Resilience and Vinai-thitpam

Psychological, feminist, and trauma-based readings help explain Lia's distress, family relationships, and response to beauty standards. The present study places these concerns alongside the ethical ideas of the *Thirukkural*. It asks how Lia's growing participation in treatment can be understood through resilience and firmness in action. This approach adds to the discussion of her illness without replacing its medical or social dimensions.

The *Thirukkural* contains 1,330 couplets arranged in three books: Aram (Virtue), Porul (Wealth), and Inbam (Love). Its teachings address conduct and relationships across many areas of life. P. S. Sundaram discusses the broad relevance of its ethical principles, including self-control, perseverance, justice, compassion, and wisdom (Sundaram xxii). These ideas provide practical ways to think about responding to hardship.

Vinai-thitpam, understood as firmness in action, is central to this reading. The paper uses it to distinguish the strength of an effort from the purpose it serves. Persistence can sustain a person when it supports care and responsibility, but effort directed towards harm can deepen suffering. This distinction helps explain the change in Lia's understanding of control during recovery.

Lia's illness keeps her caught in strict routines around food, exercise, and secrecy, even as her health worsens. These routines show how control has become tied to harm in her thinking. She believes that "Empty is good. Empty is strong" (7), treating emptiness as proof of strength. Through the lens of Vinai-thitpam, the paper reads this belief as a harmful direction of effort. Her behavior is a sign of illness, not evidence that starvation itself is a strength.

Ann Masten's description of resilience as "ordinary magic" highlights ordinary human capacities and the relationships that support them (Masten 227). This idea is

useful for reading Lia's recovery. Her progress develops through treatment, support, and repeated efforts to eat, speak honestly, and rebuild trust. Recovery does not depend on an exceptional act of will. It takes shape through daily actions made possible within a network of care.

Trauma theory also helps explain the form of Lia's story. Cathy Caruth discusses how trauma interrupts experience and resists a clear, ordered account (Caruth 4). Anderson's crossed-out words, broken sentences, and intrusive images reflect the conflict in Lia's thoughts. Cassie's death continues to shape how Lia sees herself. As she begins to speak in therapy and reconnect with others, she finds ways to give words to experiences she has struggled to share. This gradual change can be read alongside the *Thirukkural*'s concern with steadiness during hardship.

Susan Bordo examines how cultural expectations of discipline, perfection, and self-control shape women's experiences of their bodies (Unbearable Weight 165). Her work provides a useful context for Lia's pursuit of thinness. Lia believes that controlling her body will give her independence, but the demands of the illness increasingly control her life. The novel shows the painful gap between the control she seeks and the freedom she loses.

The ethical comparison in this paper keeps these social pressures in view. It considers Lia's ability to act within difficult conditions, rather than treating her illness as a personal failure. Her choices matter, but they take place within the limits of illness and the support available to her. The *Thirukkural* offers a way to reflect on perseverance without making recovery a test of moral worth.

Idukkan Azhiyamai ("Conquering Adversity," Couplets 621–630) explores hope, wisdom, persistence, and balance during hardship. This paper connects these teachings with moments in Lia's recovery. Her decision to seek life at the Gateway Motel, her continued treatment, and her efforts to rebuild family relationships provide the main examples. Her description of recovery as "…a marathon, not a sprint to the exit" (274) is especially relevant to the chapter's emphasis on steady effort.

This comparison reads *Wintergirls* as a story of resilience as well as illness. Lia's statement "I am thawing" suggests that change is still taking place. Through Vinaithitpam, her progress can be understood as a gradual redirection of effort towards care, honesty, and continued life.

Analysis and Discussion:

Conquering Adversity through Couplets 621 to 624

The chapter Idukkan Azhiyamai ("Conquering Adversity") considers how people can face suffering while holding on to their purpose. Its opening couplets emphasize courage and steady effort. Lia's journey offers a point of comparison as she moves from harmful routines towards active participation in recovery. The following discussion connects particular moments in the novel with Couplets 621–624.

Couplet 621 and Hope during Adversity

Thiruvalluvar opens the chapter with these lines:

"Smile, with patient, hopeful heart, in troublous hour; Meet and so vanquish grief; nothing hath equal power" (Thirukkural 621).

This couplet encourages a hopeful response to hardship. Its image of smiling can be read as a refusal to let suffering determine every part of life. This does not mean hiding pain or pretending to be happy. It suggests that a person may still find moments of hope while facing difficulty.

Early in the novel, Lia finds little room for that hope. Her thoughts return to calculations, guilt, and self-blame. "A synthesized narrative and poetry therapy modality is useful in treating this population because it offers women an opportunity to create an expressive and assertive voice while shifting blame from the self to the disorder" (Robbins and Pehrsson 42). Cassie's death deepens her distress, and she begins to judge even her body's needs as failures. Her illness makes it difficult to imagine a life beyond this pattern.

The cinema scene offers an image that connects to this couplet. Lia watches animated fox heroes who keep getting up after defeat: "They grit their teeth and wince when the monsters throw them against the mountain, but they always, always get back up, retie their red scarves and laugh" (61). Their laughter follows pain and struggle. Read alongside the *Thirukkural*, the scene suggests the possibility of continuing even after repeated setbacks.

Lia's description of herself as a "wooden doll whose strings were jerked" (277) conveys how little control she has felt over her actions. Her thoughts and behavior have been shaped by the disorder. Near the end of the novel, she also experiences "…an unexpected laugh…" (278). Set beside the image of the fox heroes, this small moment suggests that she is beginning to feel something beyond fear and self-blame.

Through the *Thirukkural*'s emphasis on hope, Lia's laughter can be read as a sign that suffering no longer fills her whole experience. Her recovery remains unfinished, but she can respond to life in a new way. The moment matters because it leaves room for hope within continuing difficulty.

Lia's laughter also gives the reader a glimpse of emotional change. Pain is still present, yet it is no longer the only feeling available to her. Within this reading, that small opening supports the connection between recovery and resilience.

Couplet 622 and Wisdom during Suffering

The second couplet compares adversity to a flood:

"Though sorrow, like a flood, comes rolling on, When wise men's mind regards it, it is gone" (Thirukkural 622).

The image of a flood suits the weight of Lia's distress. She faces grief, conflict with her parents, physical weakness, and thoughts that she struggles to manage.

Images of drowning, snow, and suffocation convey how trapped she feels. The comparison highlights suffering that seems too great to contain.

Lia often feels that the disorder has left her without a choice. Cassie's ghost reinforces her belief that she belongs with the dead. At the Gateway Motel, after a severe physical collapse, Lia begins to challenge that belief. She declares, "…You lied! I say. I do have a choice" (271). This moment changes the way she understands her situation and opens the possibility of seeking help.

Read alongside Couplet 622, Lia's recognition of choice resembles the wise mind confronting the flood. Her illness does not end at this point. She still needs medical care, nourishment, therapy, and support. What changes is her willingness to question the disorder's claims and take part in her recovery. The comparison concerns this new understanding, rather than the idea that thought alone can remove suffering.

Couplet 623 and Asking for Help

The third couplet describes a reversal in the power of grief:

"Who grief confront with ungrieving heart, From them griefs, put to grief, depart" (Thirukkural 623).

The phrase 'putting grief to grief' suggests that suffering can lose some of its hold over a person. In *Wintergirls*, Cassie's death shapes Lia's memories, imagined conversations, and self-blame. Lia repeatedly turns that grief against herself. Near the end, she describes a different response: "Somehow, I dragged myself out of the dark and asked for help" (277). Asking for help becomes one way of interrupting the harm.

The request matters because Lia has associated independence with secrecy and isolation. Accepting help requires her to question the control promised by the illness. Medical treatment and family support give her ways to respond to suffering that she cannot manage alone. In relation to the couplet, courage lies in this willingness to face distress with help.

The change also appears in Lia's relationships. Earlier, she hides food, deceives those involved in her care, and withdraws from her family. During recovery, she begins to speak more honestly and rebuild trust with her younger sister Emma. Remembering Cassie no longer has to lead to further harm. This can be read as an effort to make room for grief within a continuing life, rather than letting loss define every part of it.

Couplet 624 and Steady Effort

Couplet 624 uses the image of a bullock struggling through mud:

"Like the bullock struggling through deep mire, So will troubles retreat before steadfast effort." (Thirukkural 624)

The bullock's slow movement suggests effort under difficult conditions. This image suits the novel's account of recovery, where progress takes time. Lia

acknowledges, “My third visit to New Seasons is the longest one yet, a marathon, not a sprint” (274). The marathon comparison emphasizes the value of continuing through difficulty. It also challenges the expectation of a quick or simple cure.

The image of deep mud can be placed beside Lia’s description of family therapy as ‘shoveling through years of muck’ (276). Both images suggest difficult work that must continue over time. Therapy requires her to face anger, shame, and damaged trust. She keeps taking part even when the process is uncomfortable. In terms of Vinai-thitpam, her effort increasingly shifts toward care and recovery. Frustration and setbacks remain part of that process.

The final chapters show Lia beginning to understand strength differently. She describes measuring herself ‘in strength, not pounds’. Care for her body starts to replace the rules through which she has judged herself. Couplet 624 offers a useful image for this slow change: the bullock continues through the mud without an easy path. Lia’s progress also depends on small steps, repeated effort, and help along the way.

Perseverance and Recovery through Couplets 625 to 630

The later couplets develop the chapter’s concern with persistence and emotional balance. They consider how people respond when difficulty continues and when life does not match their hopes. Lia’s recovery can be read in relation to these questions. She gradually accepts that living well does not require the disappearance of every painful feeling.

Couplet 625 and Persistence of Purpose

Thiruvalluvar writes:

“Though troubles gather thick, they cannot defeat the one who never abandons the chosen purpose” (Thirukkural 625).

This couplet values holding to a purpose when problems continue. Lia’s account of treatment offers a related image: “My third visit to New Seasons is the longest one yet, a marathon, not a sprint” (274). Earlier, she has tried to leave treatment while keeping the habits of the illness hidden. During her final hospital stay in the novel, she begins to take part more honestly. She starts learning to face emotional ‘storm clouds’ without turning to harmful behavior. The comparison with Vinai-thitpam rests on this change in purpose and her continued engagement with care.

Anderson presents this progress through daily actions such as eating, attending therapy, and speaking honestly despite fear. These actions take place within treatment and supportive relationships. In relation to Couplet 625, persistence means continuing to work towards recovery even when the process is difficult.

Couplet 626 and Freedom from External Standards

The next couplet shifts attention from adversity itself to attachment:

“Those who do not cling to worldly possessions do not grieve when prosperity disappears” (Thirukkural 626).

Although the couplet refers to possessions, this paper extends its idea of attachment to the standards by which Lia judges herself. Her sense of worth becomes tied to weight and numerical goals. Family expectations also shape her understanding of achievement. Her father is an academic and her mother a cardiologist, and she feels pressure to succeed. During treatment, Lia begins to question the 'script' she feels expected to follow and the measures she has used to define herself.

Lia describes this change in her own words: "I am beginning to measure myself in strength, not pounds. Sometimes in smiles" (275). Read alongside Couplet 626, the passage suggests a gradual loosening of her dependence on external measures. Weight no longer determines her worth. This interpretation extends the couplet beyond material possessions to explore the values Lia is learning to reconsider.

Couplet 627 and Caring for the Body

Couplet 627 addresses the body's vulnerability:

"Knowing the body is the target of suffering, the wise are not disturbed when suffering comes" (Thirukkural 627).

This couplet recognizes that bodily life includes pain and vulnerability. Lia spends much of the novel resisting her body's needs. She interprets hunger as failure and weakness as achievement. Her mother challenges this view when she says, "Your body wants to live, Lia, even if your head doesn't" (234). The statement asks Lia to recognize her body's need for care. Read alongside the couplet, her recovery involves learning to respond to that need without self-blame. Eating, resting, and accepting medical support become part of preserving her life. Her statement that 'Food is life' expresses a change in how she understands nourishment and strength.

Couplet 628 and Living with Difficult Feelings

Couplet 628 considers the acceptance of suffering:

"He who understands suffering to be natural is untouched by suffering" (Thirukkural 628).

This couplet can be read as an invitation to accept that suffering is part of life. Lia struggles to tolerate grief, anger, loneliness, and fear, and her harmful behaviors offer no lasting escape from them. Near the end, she recognizes that "There is no magic cure. . . There are only small steps upward" (278). Recovery begins to mean taking manageable steps and learning to live with difficult feelings. It no longer depends on expecting permanent happiness.

The novel's images of ice and thawing support this reading. Ice suggests the emotional stillness and isolation Lia has been trapped in. Thawing suggests movement and a return to feeling. The connection with the *Thirukkural* lies in this willingness to continue living with change and vulnerability.

Couplet 629 and Emotional Balance

The penultimate couplet teaches:

"He who is not carried away by pleasure will not be overcome by sorrow" (Thirukkural 629).

Lia's illness often leaves her caught between strict control and despair. She struggles to respond to her feelings without judging herself. During recovery, she describes a wider emotional life: "I'm learning how to be angry and sad and lonely and joyful and excited and afraid and happy. I am learning how to taste everything" (276). Read alongside Couplet 629, the passage suggests a growing ability to experience different feelings without letting any one of them determine every action.

The image of taste connects emotional experience with nourishment. Lia is learning to accept both the food and the feelings she has struggled to allow into her life. Emotional balance does not require her to suppress anger or sadness. It gives her room to recognize those feelings while continuing to care for herself.

Couplet 630 and Growth through Recovery

The chapter concludes:

"He who regards pain itself as a source of growth attains greatness admired even by his enemies." (Thirukkural 630)

In this reading, Couplet 630 suggests that people may find growth while working through suffering. The comparison does not diminish the harm Lia has endured. Early in the novel, she mistakes pain and deprivation for control. Recovery asks her to face a different kind of difficulty: the discomfort of treatment, honest conversation, and rebuilding trust. These experiences serve care rather than further injury. The image of ". . . hovelling through years of muck. . ." (276) presents recovery as difficult, continued work. Lia's efforts to write letters and rebuild her relationship with Emma show that this work also involves care for others. The ending leaves that process open. Her statement, "…I am thawing" (278), uses the present continuous tense to describe a change still taking place. In relation to the *Thirukkural*, it suggests perseverance as an ongoing practice rather than a finished achievement.

Couplets 625–630 offer ways to reflect on persistence, attachment, bodily care, and emotional balance in Lia's recovery. Through Vinai-thitpam, the paper reads her progress as a change in the purpose of her effort. Treatment and renewed relationships help her direct that effort towards staying alive and taking part in daily life.

Conclusion

Reading *Wintergirls* alongside the *Thirukkural* offers an ethical perspective on Lia's recovery. It adds to psychological, feminist, and trauma-based readings by focusing on perseverance and the purposes that guide action. The chapter Idukkan Azhiyamai, or 'Conquering Adversity', provides the basis for this comparison. Vinai-thitpam helps explain how Lia gradually directs her effort toward care and

continued life.

At the beginning of the novel, Lia's thinking about strength is shaped by the illness. She associates emptiness with control and follows rules that damage her health. Recovery changes her relationship with those rules through treatment, support, and repeated attempts to act differently. Each couplet discussed in this paper highlights a part of that process, from asking for help to accepting difficult feelings. The comparison shows how classical Tamil philosophy can contribute to a reading of contemporary fiction without erasing the differences between the two works. Lia's final declaration, "I am thawing," expresses a change that is still unfolding. She is beginning to reconnect with her body, her family, and the wider experience of living. This study places the *Thirukkural* and *Wintergirls* in conversation around a shared concern with facing hardship. Lia's journey suggests that perseverance grows through care, relationships, and the willingness to keep trying. Her recovery remains unfinished, but the ending leaves room for hope and a life beyond the demands of the illness.

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