



Thresholds of Memory: Mythopoetic Invocation in Nainativu and Nagapoosani Verse

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Abstract

This study examines the poetic method in *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky* and *She Who Waits at Nagapoosani's Gate*, presenting both as methodological exemplars of post-war literary expression. Drawing on mythopoetics, trauma theory, sacred space, and lyrical ethnography, the analysis explores how ritual rhythm and symbolic geography reclaim cultural memory. Each poem enacts indirect witnessing and ceremonial continuity, one through maritime invocation and the other through devotional threshold imagery. Tamil ritual language and sacred landscapes become mnemonic vessels of survival and remembrance. Comparative readings of Eliot, Ali, Arasanayagam, and Brathwaite situate the poems within a broader tradition of post-war verse. The study also engages newer poetic strategies such as forensic reading, healing-centered poetics, constraint-based innovation, and digital mapping. These poems show how lyrical form can serve as witness and ritual, offering a resilient framework for cultural reclamation in the aftermath of displacement and historical rupture.

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1. Introduction

In the aftermath of war, poetry often becomes a vessel for memory, reclamation, and ritual. *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky* exemplifies a unique poetic method that blends post-war cultural witnessing with mythopoetic invocation. Unlike conventional lyric poetry that centers personal trauma or abstract emotion, this work anchors itself in the sacred geography of Nainativu Island. It invokes Tamil ritual language and maritime symbolism to construct a lyrical ethnography of survival and spiritual continuity.

This paper explores the poetic method employed in *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky*, emphasizing its use of ritual rhythm, spatial invocation, and post-war cultural memory. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Northrop Frye's mythopoetics, Mircea Eliade's sacred space theory, and Cathy Caruth's trauma narrative, the analysis situates the poem within a broader tradition of post-war literary expression. The method is further contextualized through comparison with selected poets such as T. S. Eliot, who employs fragmentation and cultural collapse; Agha Shahid Ali, known for lyrical exile; Jean Arasanayagam, whose work reflects testimonial post-war lyric; and Kamau Brathwaite, who uses tidal rhythm and cultural reclamation.

By foregrounding boats as mnemonic vessels and the island sky as a witness to ritual and history, the poem resists erasure and offers a model of poetic method rooted in communal voice, mythic geography, and rhythmic invocation. This study argues that such a method not only reclaims cultural memory but also expands the possibilities of post-war poetic form.

To contextualize this method within broader literary and theoretical traditions, the following literature review draws on key frameworks that illuminate the poem's symbolic and rhythmic architecture.

This study treats *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky* and *She Who Waits at Nagapoosani's Gate* not only as creative works but as methodological exemplars—texts that enact and expand poetic strategies for cultural reclamation, ritual rhythm, and spatial invocation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Mythopoeitics and Sacred Space

The foundation of this study's poetic method lies in mythopoeitics, particularly as articulated by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* [5]. Frye's theory of archetypal patterns and symbolic resonance helps interpret how elements such as boats, sky, and ritual function not merely as metaphors but as structural devices that shape poetic meaning. These mythic symbols are not decorative—they are integral to the architecture of remembrance and invocation.

Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* deepens this framework by distinguishing between profane and sacred space [4]. Eliade argues that sacred geography is activated through ritual, transforming ordinary locations into sites of spiritual significance. This concept is essential to interpreting the island setting of *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky*, where Nainativu becomes a threshold between memory and myth, history and invocation.

Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* and *Born to Slow Horses* introduce the idea of tidal rhythm, a poetic cadence shaped by the sea's movement and cultural reclamation [3, 13]. His concept of tidalectics offers a rhythmic model that parallels the poem's use of maritime imagery and ritual repetition, positioning the verse within a diasporic and post-colonial lineage. This symbolic foundation sets the stage for the poems' engagement with trauma through indirect modes of witnessing.

2.2. Trauma, Memory, and Indirect Witnessing

The literature on trauma and cultural memory provides a critical lens for understanding the poems' indirect modes of witnessing. Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* explores how trauma resists direct narration and instead emerges through gaps, echoes, and repetition [6]. This framework supports the reading of poetic silence, rhythm, and symbolic layering as vehicles for trauma expression.

Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* challenges linear models of remembrance and proposes that memory is layered, shared, and dialogic [7]. His theory helps frame the poems' mnemonic strategies, where boats and tides carry unspoken histories across generations. These methods of indirect witnessing allow the poems to engage with post-war memory without relying on testimonial realism. These mnemonic strategies intersect with spatial theory and ethnographic poetics, which illuminate the emotional resonance of place.

2.3. Spatial Theory and Lyrical Ethnography

Spatial theory plays a vital role in interpreting the transformation of geographic coordinates into sacred landscapes. Edward Soja's concept of *Thirdspace* conceptualizes space simultaneously physical, mental, and lived [9]. Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place* emphasize the emotional resonance of place over abstract geography [10]. These perspectives clarify how *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky* and *She Who Waits at Nagapoosani's Gate* construct Nainativu and Nagapoosani not as static locations but as mnemonic terrains activated by ritual.

Renato Rosaldo's *Culture and Truth* contribute the notion of lyrical ethnography where poetic language documents cultural experience with emotional and symbolic depth [8]. This ethnographic lens allows the poems to function as cultural texts—recording ritual, myth, and memory through lyrical form. These frameworks are crucial for understanding how poetic space becomes a vessel for cultural memory.

2.4. Comparative Poetic Lineages

In comparative terms, the poetic method under study diverges from several established traditions while remaining in dialogue with them. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* employs fragmentation and cultural collapse to reflect modernist disillusionment [14]. Agha Shahid Ali's *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* uses the ghazal form to express lyrical exile and longing [11]. Jean Arasanayagam's *Apocalypse '83* offers testimonial lyric grounded in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict [12]. Kamau Brathwaite's work reclaims Caribbean identity through rhythmic invocation [13].

While *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky* and *She Who Waits at Nagapoosani's Gate* share thematic concerns with these poets—exile, trauma, cultural collapse—they distinguish themselves through ritual cadence, communal voice, and invocation of sacred geography. Their method is not rooted in fragmentation or personal lament but in ceremonial rhythm and mythic continuity.

Together, these frameworks provide a layered foundation for analyzing how poetic form enacts cultural memory through rhythm, space, and symbolic invocation.

3. Newer Methods for Creating Poetry

While the preceding literature review draws on established theoretical frameworks and comparative poetics, recent innovations in poetic practice offer expanded approaches to composition, interpretation, and cultural reclamation. These newer methods complement the ritual and mnemonic strategies explored in *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky*, and suggest additional directions for post-war verse, lyrical ethnography, and mythic experimentation.

The newer poetic methods outlined above offer valuable lenses for interpreting and expanding the compositional strategies in *She Who Waits at Nagapoosani's Gate* [1] and *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky* [2]. Each method deepens the ritual, mnemonic, and spatial dimensions already present in these works, while suggesting future directions for poetic experimentation.

3.1. Forensic Reading and Creative Experiments

In *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky*, the forensic dissection of diction and rhythm reveals a tidal cadence that mirrors Brathwaite's diasporic pulse [3, 13]. Rekdal's experimental framework [15] could be used to reverse-engineer the poem's symbolic architecture—boats, bells, and sky—into modular exercises for ritual invocation. In *She Who Waits at Nagapoosani's Gate*, forensic reading highlights the interplay between waiting, naming, and mythic gatekeeping, offering a template for poetic cycles built on threshold imagery and devotional repetition.

3.2. Healing-Centered Poetics

Both poems enact cultural and emotional restoration through ritual voice. Heller's healing-centered approach [19] aligns with the botanical and memorial motifs in *She Who Waits at Nagapoosani's Gate*, where the act of waiting becomes a

meditative gesture. In *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky*, healing emerges through communal rhythm and sacred geography, transforming trauma into ceremonial continuity.

3.3. Constraint-Based Innovation

Malech's constraint-based techniques ^[16] offer a generative model for mythic reversals and ritual lament. In *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky*, constrained repetition could be used to encode tidal rhythms or ancestral chants. In *She Who Waits at Nagapoosani's Gate*, anagrammatic or erasure-based forms could deepen the poem's engagement with silence, absence, and invocation.

3.4. Digital Humanities and Poetic Data

Martin's prosodic mapping ^[17] opens possibilities for analyzing the sonic patterns in both poems. *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky* could be digitally annotated to trace ulama rhythms or Tamil ritual cadences, while *She Who Waits at Nagapoosani's Gate* could be mapped for its botanical and devotional metrics. These approaches support a hybrid method that combines lyrical ethnography with digital poetics.

3.5. Queer Form Invention

Willis's use of African American poetic forms ^[18] offers a structural parallel to the mythic societies invoked in both poems. *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky* could be reimagined through kwansaba or bop forms to emphasize communal voice and rhythmic invocation. *She Who Waits at Nagapoosani's Gate* could adopt eintou's compact structure to intensify its ritual and spatial focus.

Together, these applications demonstrate how newer poetic methods can enrich the symbolic, rhythmic, and cultural dimensions of both poems. They offer tools for expanding post-war verse into experimental, healing, and digitally engaged terrains.

3.6. Mythic Recomposition and Ritual Looping

This method combines mythic recomposition, which involves the fragmentation and reassembly of symbolic narratives, with ritual looping, a technique that uses recursive poetic structures to simulate ceremonial repetition. It draws inspiration from Tamil oral traditions, ulama chant cycles, and devotional verse architecture.

In *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky* ^[2], mythic recomposition allows the poet to separate ancestral symbols such as boats, bells, and salt wind, and reintroduce them across stanzas within shifting ritual contexts. Ritual looping reinforces this structure through repeated cadences and mirrored syntax, reflecting the cyclical nature of tides and ceremonies. In *She Who Waits at Nagapoosani's Gate* ^[1], the method intensifies the devotional atmosphere by looping threshold imagery such as gates, silence, and gaze, while recomposing the goddess's attributes into a layered invocation. This approach deepens the mnemonic and ceremonial functions of both poems, transforming poetic form into a vessel for mythic continuity and cultural reclamation.

To examine how these poetic strategies, operate within *Boats*

Beneath the Nainativu Sky, the following methodology outlines the interpretive and comparative approach used in this study.

4. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in close textual analysis and comparative literary theory.

The study treats the poems as both artistic expressions and structured experiments in lyrical ethnography, shaped by post-war cultural memory and ritual rhythm.

The central aim is to examine the poetic method in *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky*, focusing on its use of ritual rhythm, mythic structure, and spatial invocation. Rather than analyzing thematic content alone, the emphasis is placed on how poetic technique functions as a medium for cultural memory and post-war witnessing.

Three theoretical domains guide this inquiry. First, mythopoetic theory offers a framework for interpreting symbolic elements such as boats, tides, and sacred geography. Foundational texts by Northrop Frye ^[5] and Mircea Eliade ^[4] provide insight into archetypal patterns and the transformation of ordinary space into sacred place through ritual.

Second, trauma and memory studies inform the reading of indirect witnessing and lyrical repetition. Cathy Caruth's theory of narrative gaps and echoic structure ^[6], along with Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory ^[7], support the interpretation of the poem as a layered act of remembrance rather than a linear testimony.

Third, spatial theory and ethnographic poetics help explain the poem's engagement with place and ritual. Edward Soja's concept of Third space ^[9] and Yi-Fu Tuan's distinction between space and place ^[10] clarify how the poem constructs Nainativu as a mnemonic landscape. Renato Rosaldo's notion of lyrical ethnography ^[8] further supports the view of poetic method as cultural documentation.

The study also includes a comparative component that examines how the poem's method diverges from or resonates with selected poets. These include T. S. Eliot's use of fragmentation ^[14], Agha Shahid Ali's lyrical exile ^[11], Jean Arasanayagam's testimonial lyric ^[12], and Kamau Brathwaite's tidal rhythm ^[3, 13]. Each comparison highlights the distinctiveness of the poem's approach, particularly its communal voice, ritual cadence, and invocation of sacred geography.

All textual analysis is supported by references and grounded in established literary scholarship. This methodology is designed to reveal not only what the poem communicates but also how it communicates. The poetic method reclaims cultural memory and expands the possibilities of post-war verse.

Applying this methodology to the poem reveals how its symbolic structure and rhythmic cadence enact cultural memory and ritual invocation.

These poems ^[1] and ^[2] emerged from a sustained engagement with Tamil ritual language, post-war memory, and mythic geography. Their structure reflects an intentional layering of cadence, invocation, and symbolic architecture.

5. Textual Analysis

5.1.1. Maritime Invocation and Mnemonic Rhythm

Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky

Five hulls drift near the shore's unspoken edge,
 Their ropes like verses knotted into stone.
 Blue dreams, red prayers, green grief, white silent pledge—
 Each name a hymn the sea has long intoned.

The hound appears at dawn with salted fur,
 A shadow stitched to tide and temple bell.
 It walks the rocks, a quiet arbiter,
 And guards the hush where parting rites must dwell.

The fisher's gaze dissolves in morning mist,
 While clouds confess what memory conceals.
 The hound returns where salt and silence kissed,
 And sniffs each hull to read what absence feels.

The land afar is neither near nor lost,
 Just waiting, like a net not yet uncast.
 These boats, these names, this stillness—what they cost
 Is written not in waves but in the mast.

Fig 1: Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky Published on Poetry.com^[1]

This poem enacts a rhythmic and symbolic reclamation of post-war Tamil memory. The boat, as a recurring image, becomes a symbolic archive, bearing the weight of ancestral memory and ritual across shifting waters. Its rhythmic architecture echoes the ebb and flow of ritual time, drawing on tidal motion as metaphor. The invocation of temple bells, salt wind, and sky reconfigures the island as a ritual threshold where memory and myth converge. The communal voice abandons individual lament in favor of a choral invocation shaped by shared ritual experience, offering a lyrical ethnography of endurance and spiritual continuity.

The central image of the boat bears ancestral memory, ritual, and unspoken grief across water. The poem's rhythmic structure evokes tidal movement, invoking Kamau Brathwaite's concept of tidal rhythm, where poetic cadence reflects the sea's pulse and diasporic continuity^[3, 13]. The opening lines establish this rhythm

Boats drift beneath the island sky,
 carrying bells, bodies, and breath.^[2]

This symbolic layering aligns with Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory, which views remembrance as dialogic and accumulative rather than linear^[7]. The boat's passage becomes a metaphor for cultural survival, echoing trauma through indirect witnessing. Cathy Caruth's concept of echoic structure supports this reading, where trauma is registered through gaps and repetition rather than direct narration^[6].

Spatially, the poem reconfigures Nainativu as a ritual threshold where memory and myth converge. Ritual markers such as temple bells, salt wind, and ancestral chants activate Mircea Eliade's sacred space theory, transforming the island into a site of spiritual continuity^[4]. Edward Soja's Third space and Yi-Fu Tuan's distinction between space and place further clarify how the poem constructs a lived, imagined,

and emotionally resonant geography^[9, 10].

The voice of the poem is communal and ceremonial. It abandons individual lament in favor of a choral invocation shaped by shared ritual experience. This approach diverges from the fragmentation in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*^[14], and contrasts with Agha Shahid Ali's lyrical exile^[11] and Jean Arasanayagam's testimonial lyric^[12]. While those poets engage trauma through dislocation or direct testimony, *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky* chooses symbolic invocation and rhythmic ritual as its mode of cultural reclamation.

5.2. Threshold Imagery and Devotional Repetition

She Who Waits at Nagapoosani's Gate

She stands beneath the arch of flame and sky,
 Her anklets chiming with the breath of stone.
 Nainativu's wind, so friendly, wanders by—
 It whispers, "Come. I have a tale to own."

I silently observe the passersby—
 So many faces, motives, tongues, and creeds.
 Though I'm not one you pause to glorify,
 I softly wish you luck in all your deeds.

I've seen the oil lamps flicker, fade, and die,
 Heard chants dissolve like mist in morning rain.
 Yet once, a stranger met my weathered eye—
 I thank you, traveler, for noticing me.

Fig 2: She Who Waits at Nagapoosani's Gate Published on Poetry.com^[2]

This poem centers on devotional repetition and mythic gatekeeping. Stillness is ritualized, and the threshold becomes a site of devotional endurance.

The figure at the gate embodies Tamil ritual patience and spiritual invocation, drawing on ulama chant cycles and botanical symbolism. The poem's compact structure and rhythmic looping reflect mythic recomposition, where absence is transformed into invocation. Techniques that inform the looping syntax and meditative cadence of *She Who Waits at Nagapoosani's Gate*. Similarly, the maritime invocation in *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky* echoes the call-and-response patterns found in Tamil lamentation and folk recitation, where rhythm becomes a mnemonic device for ancestral grief. These oral forms do not merely influence content; they structure the poems' temporal flow, embedding ritual time and communal voice into the poetic line. This method aligns with healing-centered poetics and lyrical ethnography, offering a feminine and devotional counterpoint to the maritime invocation of the previous poem.

Its opening lines evoke this atmosphere,
 She waits where salt wind names the goddess,
 beneath a gate that does not close.^[1]

Through threshold imagery, botanical motifs, and looping syntax, the poem enacts lyrical ethnography and healing-centered poetics. It draws on Tamil devotional traditions and ulama chant cycles to build a rhythmic structure that reflects ceremonial endurance. The repetition of silence, gaze, and

naming deepens the poem's mnemonic function, transforming absence into invocation.

5.3. Comparative Poetic Terrain

Together, these poems present distinct yet complementary poetic methods that reclaim cultural memory through ritual rhythm, mythic geography, and symbolic invocation. Each transforms Tamil ritual language and sacred landscape into a lyrical vessel for post-war witnessing, offering forms that resist fragmentation and erasure.

One engages in maritime memory and communal voice, while the other traces ritual waiting and sacred thresholds. *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky* foregrounds tidal rhythm and symbolic geography, while *She Who Waits at Nagapoosani's Gate* emphasizes devotional cadence and mythic gatekeeping. Both enact cultural reclamation through rhythm, invocation, and spatial transformation, offering resilient frameworks for post-war expression rooted in Tamil ritual and mythic continuity.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky* reveals a poetic method rooted in ritual rhythm, mythic geography, and communal memory. Through symbolic imagery and cyclical cadence, the poem transforms maritime and sacred elements into vessels of cultural reclamation. Its use of indirect witnessing, spatial invocation, and lyrical ethnography positions within a distinct tradition of post-war verse that resists fragmentation and isolation.

By engaging with theoretical frameworks in mythopoetics^[5], sacred space^[4], trauma and memory studies^[6, 7], and spatial theory^[9, 10], the poem demonstrates how poetic form can embody historical experience without relying on direct testimony. The invocation of Nainativu as a mnemonic landscape and the boat as a carrier of layered memory reflect a method that is both symbolic and ceremonial.

Comparative analysis with poets such as T. S. Eliot^[14], Agha Shahid Ali^[11], Jean Arasanayagam^[12], and Kamau Brathwaite^[3, 13] highlights the uniqueness of this approach. While sharing thematic concerns with exile, trauma, and cultural collapse, the poem under study offers a model of poetic practice that emphasizes ritual continuity and collective voice.

This study concludes that the poetic method in *Boats Beneath the Nainativu Sky* expands the possibilities of post-war literature. It offers a framework for writing that honors cultural memory through rhythm, invocation, and sacred geography. Such a method invites further exploration into how poetry can serve as both witness and ritual, especially in contexts shaped by displacement, conflict, and reclamation. Both poems serve not only as creative works but as methodological exemplars, demonstrating how poetic form can enact cultural memory, ritual continuity, and spatial invocation through innovative compositional strategies.

In reclaiming ritual and memory through poetic form, these works affirm the enduring power of verse to carry history, heal trauma, and reimagine cultural continuity. This study further contributes a Tamil-centered framework to post-war poetics, expanding the field beyond Euro-American trauma narratives.

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