



## Saltline Reversal and Ritual Memory: Experimental Methods in Tamil Post-War Poetics

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### Abstract

This study applies six innovative poetic methods: Forensic Reading, Healing-Centered Poetics, Constraint-Based Innovation, Digital Humanities, Queer Form Invention, and Ritual Ethnography. These approaches are explored through two original poems, Saltline Reversal and Where Salt Remembers, which engage Tamil ritual language, mythic geography, and post-war memory. Drawing on Tamil-centered frameworks and insights from Sivathamby, Blackburn, and Sivanandan, the analysis demonstrates how poetic form can enact emotional restoration, ceremonial continuity, and mnemonic survival. By integrating interdisciplinary technique with Tamil ritual poetics, the study offers a model for sustaining cultural memory in contexts shaped by trauma and displacement. Full-text presentation of the poems enables direct engagement with their symbolic architecture, rhythmic cadence, and ceremonial voice.

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### 1. Introduction

In the aftermath of cultural rupture, poetry often becomes a vessel for survival, invocation, and mnemonic continuity. Tamil post-war verse, especially when rooted in sacred geography and ritual cadence, provides fertile ground for both cultural reclamation and formal innovation. The following introduction situates the study within the broader context of Tamil post-war poetics and outlines the creative and theoretical motivations behind the selected poems. This study examines two original works titled Saltline Reversal: A Queer Form Invention from Nainativu Beach <sup>[1]</sup> and Where Salt Remembers: A Healing-Centered Poem from Nainativu Beach <sup>[2]</sup>. These poems are treated as poetic experiments that engage trauma, memory, and ritual through interdisciplinary compositional strategies.

This study introduces a Tamil-centered poetic methodology that bridges ritual cadence, experimental form, and post-war memory, offering an alternative to Euro-American trauma frameworks.

This study contributes a Tamil-centered framework for post-war poetics that integrates ritual cadence, experimental form, and cultural reclamation. It expands existing trauma literature by foregrounding ceremonial continuity and lyrical ethnography rooted in Tamil oral traditions.

The poetic methods explored in this study include Forensic Reading, Healing-Centered Poetics, Constraint-Based Innovation, Digital Humanities, and Queer Form Invention. These approaches reflect a growing body of literary practice that challenges conventional lyricism and expands the expressive terrain of post-war verse. Meredith Heller's therapeutic poetics emphasize emotional restoration through lyrical repetition and botanical imagery <sup>[3]</sup>. Dora Malech's constraint-based syntax demonstrates how poetic limitation can deepen symbolic resonance <sup>[4]</sup>. Meredith Martin's digital prosody tools offer new ways to trace ceremonial rhythm and sonic architecture <sup>[5]</sup>. Paisley Rekdal's forensic reading framework treats poetic composition as a layered investigation <sup>[6]</sup>. Mia S. Willis's queer form invention builds lyrical spaces of resistance through compact ceremonial structures <sup>[7]</sup>.

These contemporary methods intersect with Tamil ritual aesthetics and oral traditions. Karthigesu Sivathamby's study of ancient Tamil drama reveals how performance and invocation are structurally intertwined in Tamil literary history <sup>[9]</sup>. Stuart Blackburn's ethnographic work on oral performance highlights the mnemonic and ceremonial functions of chant cycles and narrative rhythm <sup>[10]</sup>. Ambalavaner Sivanandan's reflections on cultural resistance provide a political lens through which Tamil poetics can be understood as acts of survival and reclamation <sup>[8]</sup>.

The poem *Saltline Reversal* employs constraint-based syntax and queer form invention to encode grief and ritual silence. The poem *Where Salt Remembers* uses healing-centered cadence and spatial invocation to transform absence into lyrical endurance. Both works reflect a Tamil-centered framework that affirms ceremonial continuity and resists fragmentation. By situating these poems within a broader tradition of post-war poetics and experimental verse, this study explores how newer poetic methods can deepen the mnemonic, spatial, and emotional dimensions of Tamil literary expression.

Having established the thematic and methodological scope of the study, the next section reviews key poetic frameworks and scholarly approaches that inform the analysis. These methods provide the foundation for interpreting poems as both creative texts and cultural interventions.

## 2. Literature Review: Newer Methods for Creating Poetry

Contemporary poetic practice increasingly incorporates interdisciplinary and experimental methods that challenge conventional lyric forms. This study draws on six such approaches: Forensic Reading, Healing-Centered Poetics, Constraint-Based Innovation, Digital Humanities, Queer Form Invention, and Ritual Ethnography. Each method contributes to understanding how poetic form can enact cultural memory, ceremonial rhythm, and symbolic reclamation in Tamil post-war verse.

Before examining each method in detail, it is important to clarify several key terms that shape the analytical framework of this study

- Lyrical Ethnography refers to the use of poetic form to document, interpret, and evoke cultural experience. It blends lyrical expression with ethnographic insight, allowing verse to function as both emotional testimony and cultural archive. In the context of Tamil post-war poetics, lyrical ethnography captures ritual cadence, sacred geography, and communal memory through symbolic and rhythmic composition.
- Queer Form Invention describes the creation of poetic structures that resist normative syntax, linearity, and genre boundaries. Rooted in traditions of ceremonial resistance and identity reclamation, this method builds compact, ritualized forms that encode grief, kinship, and mythic recomposition. It is especially relevant to Tamil poetics where ritual silence and symbolic layering intersect with gendered and cultural marginality.
- Constraint-Based Syntax involves the deliberate use of formal limitations—such as repetition, erasure, or syntactic looping—to generate poetic meaning. These constraints intensify emotional resonance and symbolic density, often reflecting ritual endurance and mnemonic rhythm. In Tamil verse, constraint-based syntax echoes chant cycles and threshold invocation, transforming limitation into ceremonial structure.

While trauma theory often emphasizes rupture, testimony, and narrative coherence, Tamil post-war poetics resist these conventions. Instead, they enact memory through ritual repetition, spatial invocation, and symbolic layering. This study builds on Diana Taylor's concept of embodied cultural memory, extending it through Tamil chant cycles and devotional verse.

With these definitions in place, the following subsections explore each poetic method and its relevance to the two original poems under study.

### 2.1. Forensic Reading and Creative Experiments

Paisley Rekdal's *Real Toads, Imaginary Gardens* presents a series of poetic experiments that treat composition as a forensic process <sup>[6]</sup>. Rekdal emphasizes the dissection of diction, rhythm, and imagery to reveal the structural foundation of a poem. This method supports close reading practices that uncover symbolic layering and ritual cadence. In *Saltline Reversal*, forensic reading reveals how salt wind and threshold imagery are encoded through rhythmic syntax and repetition.

### 2.2. Healing-Centered Poetics

Meredith Heller's *Write a Poem, Save Your Life* positions poetry as a therapeutic medium for emotional restoration and trauma recovery <sup>[3]</sup>. Her approach aligns with the botanical and devotional motifs in *Where Salt Remembers*, where waiting becomes a meditative gesture and silence transforms into invocation. Healing-centered poetics provide a framework for understanding how ritual language and lyrical repetition can facilitate both cultural and emotional healing in post-war contexts.

### 2.3. Constraint-Based Innovation

Dora Malech's *Stet* explores constrained poetic forms such as anagrams, erasures, and syntactic looping <sup>[4]</sup>. These techniques demonstrate how limitation can generate intimacy and deepen symbolic meaning. In *Saltline Reversal*, constraint-based repetition and mythic reversals encode ritual lament and ceremonial endurance. The poem's compact structure reflects a deliberate layering of grief and invocation shaped by Tamil ritual cadence.

### 2.4. Digital Humanities and Poetic Data

Meredith Martin's *Poetry's Data* introduces digital tools for analyzing prosody and historical metrics <sup>[5]</sup>. Her work in digital humanities opens possibilities for mapping poetic rhythm and sonic patterns across cultural traditions. This method is especially relevant to Tamil oral forms such as *ulama* chant cycles, which could be digitally annotated to trace ceremonial cadence and mnemonic structure. *Where Salt Remembers* exemplifies how spatial invocation and rhythmic architecture can be studied through a hybrid model that combines lyrical ethnography with digital poetics.

### 2.5. Queer Form Invention

Mia S. Willis's *Monster House* employs African American poetic forms including *kwansaba*, *bop*, and *eintou* to construct lyrical spaces of resistance and kinship <sup>[7]</sup>. These compact ceremonial structures offer a model for Tamil-centered queer form invention as seen in *Saltline Reversal*. The poem echoes mythic societies such as *Calidonia* and uses ritual syntax to build a hybrid form of lyrical resistance. Queer form invention expands the expressive terrain of post-

war verse by integrating identity, rhythm, and ceremonial voice.

Calidonia refers to a mythic construct developed within the poems themselves<sup>[11, 12]</sup>, symbolizing ceremonial resistance and hybrid identity. It functions as a lyrical space where Tamil ritual aesthetics intersect with imagined geographies of survival and recomposition. Introduced in a separate cycle of mythic verse, Calidonia serves as a symbolic geography where ritual syntax, post-war memory, and cultural hybridity converge.

### 2.6. Ritual Ethnography and Cultural Resistance

Karthigesu Sivathamby's Drama in Ancient Tamil Society provides a foundational understanding of Tamil ritual aesthetics, where performance and invocation are structurally intertwined<sup>[9]</sup>. Stuart Blackburn's ethnographic study of Tamil oral traditions highlights the mnemonic and ceremonial functions of chant cycles and narrative rhythm<sup>[10]</sup>. These insights support the architectural choices in both poems, where poetic rhythm echoes ulama chant structures and threshold invocation. Ambalavaner Sivanandan's reflections on cultural resistance offer a political lens through which Tamil poetics can be understood as acts of survival and reclamation<sup>[8]</sup>. Together, these sources affirm the role of poetic form in sustaining cultural memory and resisting erasure.

The theoretical approaches outlined above are not only conceptual but also operational. The following methodology section explains how each poetic strategy is applied to the selected texts through close reading, comparative analysis, and cultural contextualization.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close textual analysis and comparative poetic theory. The two original poems under examination, Saltline Reversal and Where Salt Remembers, are treated as both creative works and structured experiments in post-war cultural memory. The analysis focuses on how poetic technique functions as a medium for ritual rhythm, symbolic architecture, and mnemonic continuity.

#### Saltline Reversal: A Queer Form Invention from Nainativu Beach

**The hound walks backward toward the rising tide**

**Salt gathers in its fur like whispered prayer**

**Each boat forgets the name it once had worn**

**Had worn it once the name forgets each boat**

**Return is not a place but breath and thread**

**The fisher's gaze becomes a knotted rope**

**Salt settles where the silence used to sing**

**Sing used to silence the where settles salt**

**The shrine bell rings though no one hears the sound**

**A name is not a name but grief unclaimed**

**The hound returns with someone else's eyes**

**Eyes changed become have gaze the hound of**

**Fig 1:** Saltline Reversal: A Queer Form Invention from Nainativu Beach

This poem enacts mythic recomposition through constraint-based syntax and queer form invention. Its compact structure

encodes grief, ritual silence, and threshold imagery, reflecting Tamil ceremonial endurance and ulama chant cadence.

#### Where Salt Remembers: A Healing-Centered Poem from Nainativu Beach

**The boats are still, their hulls no longer ache**

**The ropes once frayed now hum with softened thread**

**A hound returns, not seeking what was lost**

**But guarding what the silence learned to mend**

**The shrine bell rings, not loud but low and kind**

**Its echo folds into the morning mist**

**The fisher's gaze no longer holds the storm**

**But watches how the tide begins to lift**

**The salt upon the rocks is not a wound**

**It's memory that chose to stay and heal**

**The hound lies down beside the painted hulls**

**And dreams of names the sea will soon reveal**

**Fig 2:** Where Salt Remembers: A Healing-Centered Poem from Nainativu Beach

This poem explores emotional restoration through healing-centered poetics and devotional repetition. Botanical motifs and spatial invocation transform silence into lyrical endurance, echoing Tamil ritual rhythm and sacred geography.

### 3.1. Textual Analysis and Forensic Reading

The first methodological principle involves forensic reading, which enables a detailed examination of diction, cadence, and symbolic layering. This approach is informed by Paisley Rekdal's framework<sup>[6]</sup> and treats poetic composition as a layered investigation. It is applied to Saltline Reversal to uncover how grief, ritual silence, and mythic invocation are encoded through rhythmic syntax and repetition.

### 3.2. Healing-Centered Interpretation

The second principle integrates healing-centered poetics to interpret emotional restoration and ceremonial endurance. Meredith Heller's therapeutic model<sup>[3]</sup> informs the reading of Where Salt Remembers, where repetition, botanical imagery, and devotional cadence contribute to cultural healing. This method highlights how poetic form can serve as a vessel for both personal and communal recovery.

### 3.3. Constraint-Based and Queer Form Innovation

The third principle explores how poetic limitation and ceremonial structure shape lyrical resistance. Dora Malech's work on constrained syntax<sup>[4]</sup> and Mia S. Willis's use of compact ritual forms<sup>[7]</sup> provide models for understanding the architectural choices in Saltline Reversal. The poem's structure reflects a Tamil-centered queer form invention that encodes ritual lament and mythic recomposition.

### 3.4. Digital Humanities and Prosodic Mapping

The fourth principle engages digital humanities perspectives, particularly Meredith Martin's work on prosodic mapping<sup>[5]</sup>. This approach suggests future directions for annotating Tamil ritual rhythms and spatial invocation. Digital tools offer a



hybrid model that combines lyrical ethnography with sonic analysis, especially relevant to ulama chant cycles and devotional verse structures.

3.5. Comparative Poetic Frameworks

The fifth principle employs comparative analysis to situate poems within broader traditions of post-war verse. Tamil oral forms such as ulama chant cycles and threshold invocation are examined alongside global poetic strategies that emphasize rhythm, memory, and cultural reclamation. This comparative lens supports a Tamil-centered framework that affirms ceremonial continuity and resists fragmentation

3.6. Ritual Ethnography and Cultural Resistance

The final principle draws on ritual ethnography and cultural resistance theory to deepen the interpretive framework. Karthigesu Sivathamby’s study of Tamil drama provides insight into the structural relationship between performance and invocation [9]. Stuart Blackburn’s documentation of Tamil oral traditions highlights the mnemonic and ceremonial functions of chant cycles [10]. Ambalavaner Sivanandan’s reflections on identity and survival offer a political foundation for reading poetic form as a tool of cultural endurance [8]. These perspectives reinforce the role of poetic rhythm and symbolic architecture in sustaining Tamil memory and resisting erasure.

| Poetic Method            | Saltline Reversal                        | Where Salt Remem-bers                     |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Forensic Reading         | Threshold syntax, salt wind repetition   | Botanical layering, silence as cadence    |
| Healing-Centered Poetics | Ritual silence, grief encoding           | Meditative waiting, emotional restoration |
| Constraint-Based Syntax  | Mythic reversal, compact phrasing        | Repetition as invocation                  |
| Digital Humanities       | Hybrid ceremonial form, ritual lament    | Feminine cadence, devotional rhythm       |
| Queer Form Invention     | Mnemonic structure, mythic recomposition | Cultural healing, symbolic invocation     |

Table 1: Mapping poetic methods to expressive functions in Saltline Reversal and Where Salt Remembers.

With the methodological framework in place, the study now turns to a detailed textual analysis of the two poems. Each work is examined for its use of ritual rhythm, symbolic architecture, and experimental form in relation to Tamil post-war memory.

4. Textual Analysis

See Figure 1 for the full text of “Saltline Reversal.” See Figure 2 for the full text of “Where Salt Remembers.

4.1. Saltline Reversal: A Queer Form Invention from Nainativu Beach Published on Poetry.com [1]

As shown in Figure 1, the poem’s compact structure loops threshold imagery such as gates, gaze, and invocation into a tightly woven form that reflects Tamil devotional endurance. This poem enacts mythic recomposition through constraint-based syntax and queer form invention. The salt wind functions as a mnemonic agent, naming grief and ritual

silence through compact and recursive phrasing. The structure loops threshold imagery such as gates, gaze, and invocation into a tightly woven form that reflects Tamil devotional endurance. Its cadence resonates with ulama chant cycles, while the symbolic layering aligns with forensic reading techniques. The poem transforms symbolic absence into ceremonial presence, offering a lyrical ethnography of post-war resilience. Repetition and spatial compression intensify the emotional register, allowing ritual lament to emerge through poetic architecture. These structural choices reflect the influence of Tamil oral traditions documented by Blackburn [10] and the ceremonial aesthetics described by Sivathamby [9].

4.2. Where Salt Remembers: A Healing-Centered Poem from Nainativu Beach Published on Poetry.com [2]

Referencing Figure 2, the poem centers on botanical motifs and devotional repetition to explore themes of waiting, invocation, and emotional restoration.

This poem centers on botanical motifs and devotional repetition to explore themes of waiting, invocation, and emotional restoration. The act of waiting is rendered as a meditative gesture, where silence becomes a site of healing. Drawing on healing-centered poetics, the poem integrates Tamil ritual language with feminine devotional cadence. Its rhythmic architecture reflects ceremonial continuity, and its spatial invocation aligns with lyrical ethnography and sacred geography. The symbolic framework—rooted in salt, silence, and memory—offers a model for cultural reclamation through poetic form. The layering of natural imagery and ritual rhythm creates a space where trauma is addressed through lyrical patience and spiritual invocation. These elements resonate with the mnemonic functions of Tamil chant cycles as described by Blackburn [10] and reflect the political urgency of cultural survival articulated by Sivanandan [8].

The insights drawn from the textual analysis led to broader reflections on the role of poetic innovation in cultural survival and ceremonial continuity. The conclusion synthesizes these findings and suggests directions for future research.

5. Conclusion

This study proposes a Tamil-centered poetic methodology that integrates ritual cadence, experimental form, and post-war memory. It challenges dominant Euro-American trauma frameworks by foregrounding ceremonial continuity, lyrical ethnography, and symbolic endurance rooted in Tamil oral traditions.

This paper is limited to two original poems and selected poetic methods. It does not include reception studies or fieldwork-based annotation, which could enrich future inquiry.

This study demonstrates how innovative poetic methods can deepen the expressive, mnemonic, and ceremonial dimensions of Tamil post-war verse. Through the analysis of Saltline Reversal and Where Salt Remembers, it becomes evident that poetic form can function as both ritual and resistance. Each poem engages Tamil ritual language, mythic geography, and cultural memory while incorporating experimental techniques that expand the boundaries of lyrical ethnography.

Saltline Reversal employs constraint-based syntax and queer form invention to encode grief and ceremonial endurance. Its compact structure and symbolic layering reflect a Tamil-

centered approach to poetic resistance. Where *Salt Remembers* draws on healing-centered poetics and devotional repetition to transform silence into invocation. The poem's rhythmic architecture and botanical motifs offer a model for emotional restoration and cultural reclamation. The study also integrates insights from Tamil ritual aesthetics and oral traditions. Karthigesu Sivathamby's work on ancient Tamil drama and Stuart Blackburn's ethnographic research on oral performance provide a foundation for understanding the ceremonial rhythm and mnemonic structure present in both poems<sup>[9, 10]</sup>. Ambalavaner Sivanandan's reflections on cultural resistance further affirm the political urgency of Tamil-centered poetics in post-war contexts<sup>[8]</sup>.

By combining forensic reading, constraint-based composition, digital humanities, queer form invention, and ritual ethnography, this study affirms the value of interdisciplinary methods in crafting verse that carries history, invokes ritual, and sustains memory.

By situating Tamil post-war verse within a framework of ritual and experimental form, this study offers a counterpoint to trauma narratives that rely on testimonial clarity or confessional lyricism. While Caruth's and Tal's models prioritize individual memory and narrative rupture, the poems analyzed here emphasize communal invocation and ceremonial endurance. This Tamil-centered approach expands the field of trauma poetics by incorporating non-Western modalities of healing, resistance, and remembrance. It also contributes to performance-centered theories of cultural memory, as articulated by Diana Taylor, by demonstrating how poetic rhythm and spatial invocation can function as embodied archives.

Future research may expand this approach by incorporating field-based studies of Tamil chant cycles, exploring reader reception across diasporic communities, or applying digital annotation tools to trace ceremonial metrics and symbolic design in Tamil poetic traditions.

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