



Listening Across Thresholds: Poetic Cycles in a South Asian Ethnographic Trilogy

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Abstract

This paper explores a trilogy of poetic ethnographies: *Stone, Sea, and Soul*, *Ferries That No Longer Run*, and *Barefoot Theory*. Each work listens across landscapes shaped by war, displacement, and devotional memory. In these trilogies rather than tracing events in linear form, the trilogy moves through recurring motifs and regional rhythms, inviting the reader to dwell in silence, breath, and soil. Drawing from Indian literary traditions including Bhakti poetry, classical Tamil poetics, and the theories of rasa, dhvani, and tinai, the texts enact a lyrical method where walking becomes a form of attention and terrain becomes a living interlocutor. The Malarikkal cycle in *Barefoot Theory* offers a distinct spiral of embodied movement, carrying memory through barefoot paths and water lily fields. These poetic cycles do not seek resolution. They seek presence. Through repetition, listening, and vernacular devotion, the trilogy offers a way of knowing that is tactile, ethical, and alive.

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1. Introduction

In the quiet aftermath of war and displacement, listening becomes more than a skill. It becomes a way of honoring what remains and what resists being spoken. The trilogy explored in this paper *Stone, Sea, and Soul*, *Ferries That No Longer Run*, and *Barefoot Theory* offers a lyrical approach to fieldwork. These texts move through northern Sri Lanka and southern India with tenderness and attention ^[1, 2, 3].

Rather than tracing events in a straight line, each work returns to certain images, places, and silences. Stones, ferries, and bare feet are not simply symbols. They are rhythms that shape how memory is felt, how absence is marked, and how landscapes begin to speak. These cycles invite the reader to listen with care, to pause, and to notice what echoes across time and terrain.

This form of listening recalls the Bhakti poets such as Kabir, Mirabai, and Tukaram. Their verses emerged from walking, singing, and listening in vernacular tongues. Kabir's poetry, rooted in 15th-century Varanasi, blended Hindi, Urdu, and regional dialects to challenge caste and ritual orthodoxy. Mirabai, writing in Rajasthani and Braj in 16th-century Mewar, sang of divine longing and feminine devotion. Tukaram, a 17th-century Marathi poet from Maharashtra, composed abhangs that honored soil, breath, and vernacular rhythm. Their linguistic and regional diversity reflects a shared ethos: poetry as breath, resistance, and listening ^[19, 20]. These essays illuminate Bhakti poetry not merely as spiritual expression, but as a form of vernacular resistance, grounded in the textures of soil, breath, and everyday devotion ^[20]. This poetic method resonates deeply with Indian literary traditions. Many of these traditions are rooted in regional languages and devotional movements. Their poetry was carried by breath and soil. It honored the body as a vessel of attention and the landscape as a living interlocutor ^[2, 5].

Modern Indian poets such as A. K. Ramanujan and Arun Kolatkar continued this ethos. Ramanujan's translations of Sangam poetry revealed how ancient Tamil verse wove love, war, and nature into compact, resonant forms ^[4]. Kolatkar's *Jejuri* offered a minimalist pilgrimage through ruins and roadside shrines, where the sacred and the ordinary quietly blurred ^[5]. These works, like the trilogy, do not seek resolution. They seek presence.

The theoretical relationship between Indian poetics and lyrical ethnography rests on shared commitments to cyclical time, embodied attention, and emotional resonance. Classical Tamil poetics developed the concept of *tinai*, a poetic ecology that links landscape, season, and emotion ^[17, 18]. Each *tinai* carries its own mood and terrain, inviting the reader to feel geography as a form of memory. The theory of *rasa*, rooted in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, describes the emotional essence evoked by a work of art. It is not simply a reaction but a cultivated experience, where the listener is drawn into a shared emotional space ^[14, 15]. The concept of *dhvani*, meaning resonance or suggestion, deepens this relationship. It teaches that the most profound meanings in poetry arise not from direct statement but from what is implied, remembered, or felt in the spaces between words ^[14, 15].

This paper looks closely at how poetic cycles function across the trilogy. It considers how they carry themes of memory, displacement, and embodied listening. It also reflects on the distinctiveness of the Malarikkal cycle in Barefoot Theory, which draws from Indian poetic traditions to offer a different kind of movement. This movement listens across regions and through the soles of the feet ^[9-13].

2. Structural Cycles: Stones, Ferries, and Bare Feet

Each work in the trilogy carries its own rhythm. These rhythms do not arrive from outside. They emerge from the textures of place, the weight of memory, and the quiet gestures of those who remain. The poetic cycles in Stone, Sea, and Soul, Ferries That No Longer Run, and Barefoot Theory are shaped by recurring motifs that do not simply repeat. They return with variation, with breath, and with listening ^[1, 2, 3].

In Stone, Sea, and Soul, the cycle is triadic. Stone, sea, and soul form a triangle of endurance and erosion. The stone holds history, the sea carries it away, and the soul listens in silence. This structure does not move forward. It reverberates. The reader is invited to dwell in stillness, to feel the weight of what cannot be rebuilt ^[1].

Ferries That No Longer Run offers a threshold loop. The ferry is a connector, but here it becomes a symbol of absence. It does not arrive. It does not depart. Instead, it marks the space between longing and loss. The cycle loops through psychological thresholds, nostalgia, displacement, and the quiet ache of interrupted transit ^[2].

Barefoot Theory moves differently. Its cycle spirals outward from Malarikkal in Kerala toward Kankesanthurai in Sri Lanka. The barefoot motif is not only ethnographic. It is devotional. It recalls Indian poetic traditions where walking is a form of listening, and soil is a form of memory ^[3, 9, 10, 11]. This spiral does not return to the same point. It expands. It carries the reader across regions, through water lily fields, temple chants, and the soft resistance of earth.

These structural cycles are not ornamental. They are ways of

knowing. They shape how the reader moves through each work, how silence is held, and how memory is felt in the body. The trilogy does not offer closure. It offers rhythm

Table 1: Structural cycles across the trilogy

Stone, Sea, and Soul	Ferries That No Longer Run	Barefoot Theory
Cycle Type Motifs Stone Soul	Threshold Loop Ferry Absence	Spiral Bare Feet Soil
Poetic Movement Triangle of endurance and erosion	Poetic Movement The space between longing and loss Psychological thresholds Interrupted transit	Poetic Movement Walking as listening, soil as memory Ethnographic and devotional spiral

3. Thematic Recurrence: Memory, Displacement, and Listening

Across the trilogy, certain themes do not simply appear. They return. They move in cycles, echoing through stones, ferries, and bare feet. These recurrences are not rhetorical devices. They are ways of listening to what remains, what resists being named, and what asks to be felt rather than explained.

Memory in Stone, Sea, and Soul is held in stone. It is heavy, weathered, and quiet. The sea does not erase it. It carries it. The soul listens, not with judgment, but with patience ^[1]. In Ferries That No Longer Run, memory is fragmented. It arrives in pieces, like half-remembered crossings. The ferry becomes a threshold between what was and what might have been ^[2]. In Barefoot Theory, memory is tactile. It lives in the soles of the feet, in the soil of Malarikkal, and in the breath of temple chants ^[3, 9, 10].

Displacement is not treated as a singular event. It is a rhythm. In Stone, Sea, and Soul, it is felt in the erosion of place, where homes become ruins and silence becomes shelter ^[1]. In Ferries That No Longer Run, displacement is psychological. It loops through nostalgia, longing, and the ache of interrupted transit ^[2]. In Barefoot Theory, displacement is devotional. It moves across regions, not to escape, but to listen. The spiral does not seek return. It seeks presence ^[3]. Listening is the thread that binds all three works. It is not passive. It is embodied. In Stone, Sea, and Soul, listening happens through stillness. In Ferries That No Longer Run, it happens through waiting. In Barefoot Theory, it happens through walking. These modes of listening reflect Indian poetic traditions, where silence, breath, and soil are not empty. They are full of resonance. Theories of *dhvani* and *rasa* remind us that meaning often lives in suggestion, in what is felt but not said ^[14, 15].

Thematic recurrence in the trilogy is not ornamental. It is structural. It shapes how the reader moves, how memory is held, and how displacement is dignified. These themes do not resolve, they return.

Recurring Motifs Across the Trilogy

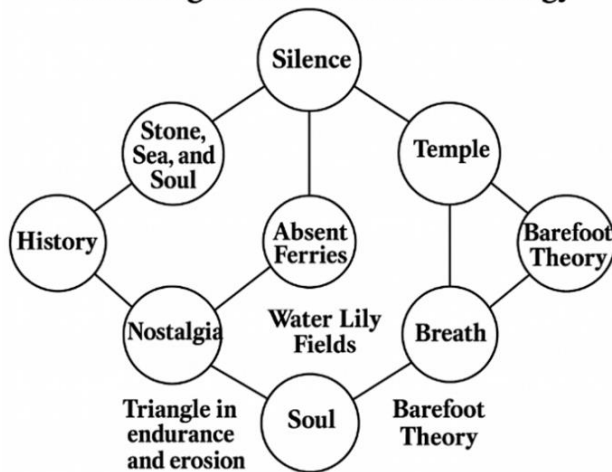


Fig 1: Thematic recurrences of memory, displacement, and listening

4. Poetic Theory and Regional Listening

The trilogy's lyrical method is not only aesthetic. It is theoretical. Each work listens through place, rhythm, and silence, drawing from Indian poetic traditions that treat the landscape as a living interlocutor. These traditions do not separate form from feeling. They invite the reader to move with the poem, to listen with the body, and to dwell in suggestion.

Classical Tamil poetics offers one such framework. The concept of *tinai* links emotion, geography, and season. A mountain is not just a mountain. It is a terrain of longing. A coastline is not just a boundary. It is a space of waiting. In Barefoot Theory, the Malarikkal cycle echoes this logic. The water lily fields are not scenery. They are memory. They are breath [3, 9, 10, 17, 18].

The theory of *rasa*, rooted in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, deepens this listening. *Rasa* is not a mood imposed by the poet. It is an experience cultivated in the reader. In *Stone, Sea, and Soul*, the *rasa* of *śānta* (quietude) emerges through stillness, erosion, and the weight of stone [1, 14, 15]. In *Ferries That No Longer Run*, the *rasa* of *karuṇa* (compassion) moves through absence, nostalgia, and the ache of interrupted crossings [2]. *Dhvani*, meaning resonance or suggestion, offers another way of listening. It teaches that meaning lives in implication, in what is felt but not said. In the trilogy, *dhvani* is carried by repetition, silence, and return. The reader is not asked to interpret. They are asked to feel. The ferry does not arrive. The stone does not speak. The barefoot path does not explain. Yet each motif resonates [14, 15].

Regional listening also means attending to vernacular rhythms. The trilogy does not write from above. It walks alongside. It listens to temple chants, ferry songs, and the quiet of post-war ruins. It honors the *Bhakti* tradition, where poetry was carried by breath and soil, not confined to courts or texts [2, 5]. This listening is not nostalgic. It is ethical. It asks how poetry can hold memory without claiming it, how it can move through displacement without erasing it.

As S. K. De observes, *rasa* is not the raw emotion of the poet. It is the cultivated experience of the listener, shaped through rhythm, terrain, and suggestion [14]. Edwin Gerow adds that *dhvani* is not ornamentation but the very medium through which *rasa* is conveyed [15]. These insights affirm that the

trilogy's lyrical method is not merely expressive. It is epistemological. It listens through silence, repetition, and breath to evoke meaning that cannot be directly named.

These poetic theories do not remain abstract. They take form in movement, especially in the Malarikkal cycle, where listening becomes embodied.

5. The Malarikkal Cycle and Embodied Movement

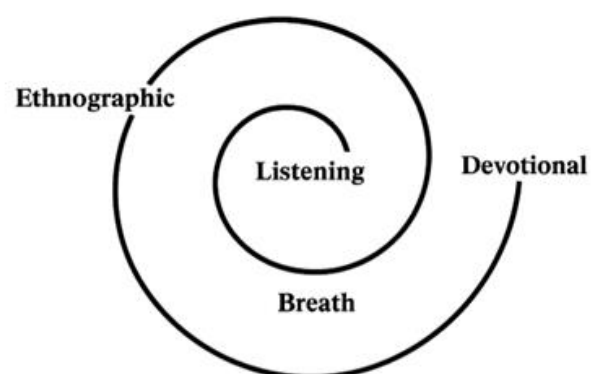
The Malarikkal cycle in Barefoot Theory does not unfold through narrative. It moves through breath, soil, and repetition. This movement is not linear. It spirals. It listens. It carries the reader across water lily fields, temple chants, and barefoot paths, inviting a form of attention that is both poetic and embodied [3, 9, 10, 11, 12].

In classical Tamil poetics, movement is often tied to terrain. The concept of *tinai* teaches that emotion and geography are inseparable. A lover's longing is shaped by the mountain's solitude. A warrior's grief is carried by the coastal wind. In Malarikkal, the water lilies do not simply bloom. They remember. They hold the breath of those who walked before [17, 18].

The barefoot spiral in Barefoot Theory, where walking becomes attention and soil a site of memory [3, 20]. As Hawley and Juergensmeyer note, *Bhakti* poets such as Kabir, Mirabai, and Tukaram composed in regional vernaculars—Hindi, Braj, Rajasthani, and Marathi—embedding devotion in the rhythms of everyday life [20]. Songs of the Saints of India not only presents translated verses but also offers contextual essays that illuminate the devotional, linguistic, and everyday rhythms of *Bhakti* poetry [20]. Such resonance deepens the ethical dimensions of Barefoot Theory, where embodied movement listens through soil and breath. It is through walking that the poem listens. It is through listening that the landscape speaks [2, 5].

Embodied movement also resists erasure. In post-war and post-displacement contexts, the body often carries what cannot be archived. The barefoot path in Malarikkal does not document. It remembers. It moves through silence, not to escape it, but to dwell within it. This movement is cyclical, devotional, and regional. It does not seek resolution. It seeks presence.

The Malarikkal cycle is distinct within the trilogy. It does not return to a single point. It expands. It listens across regions, through the soles of the feet, and into the breath of the lilies. It offers a way of moving that is poetic, ethical, and alive.



Recurring Motifs Across the Trilogy

Fig 2: Spiral movement of the Malarikkal cycle

6. Conclusion: Listening as Method

This trilogy does not offer answers. It offers rhythms. Through stones, ferries, and bare feet, it invites the reader to listen—not only to words, but to silence, repetition, and terrain. Each work moves through memory and displacement with tenderness, refusing closure and choosing presence.

Listening, in this context, is not passive. It is poetic, embodied, and ethical. It draws from Indian literary traditions where meaning is felt through suggestion (dhvani), cultivated through emotion (rasa), and shaped by terrain (tinai) ^[14, 15, 17, 18]. These theories do not separate the reader from the poem. They invite the reader to walk alongside it.

In *Stone, Sea, and Soul*, listening happens through stillness. In *Ferries That No Longer Run*, it happens through waiting. In *Barefoot Theory*, it happens through walking. These modes of listening are not interchangeable. They are rooted in place, in breath, and in the quiet dignity of those who remain.

The Malarikkal cycle offers a distinct form of movement. It spirals outward, carrying memory through soil and breath. It honors the body as a vessel of attention and the landscape as a living archive. This movement does not seek to resolve displacement. It seeks to dwell within it, gently and without erasure.

As a method, listening asks for patience. It asks for care. It asks the poet, the ethnographer, and the reader to move slowly, to return, and to feel what echoes. In this trilogy, listening becomes a way of knowing. It becomes a way of remembering. It becomes a way of staying close.

These poetic theories remind us that listening is not only a method; it is a way of knowing. As De and Gerow suggest, meaning in poetry does not arise from direct statement. It unfolds through cultivated resonance, through rasa that is felt and dhvani that lingers ^[14, 15].

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