

Metaphysical Concepts in Sangam Tamil Poetry and their Echoes in Modern Dalit Writings

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ABSTRACT

This study undertakes an extensive exploration of metaphysical constructs in Sangam Tamil poetry (c. 300 BCE–300 CE) and examines how these ontological themes reverberate in selected works of modern Dalit writers. By employing both a close textual analysis of canonical Sangam anthologies and a targeted survey of 100 Tamil-literate respondents, the research identifies four primary metaphysical motifs—unity of self and cosmos, cyclical temporality, divine immanence in nature, and transcendence of social boundaries—and traces their redeployment within Dalit narratives as vehicles of spiritual agency and social emancipation. The abstract summarizes the scope, methodology, key findings, and implications: (1) Sangam poems regularly dissolve the binary between human experience and cosmic order, a pattern mirrored in Dalit texts through images of bodily communion with land; (2) the Sangam emphasis on life–death–rebirth cycles informs Dalit writers’ portrayals of communal resilience; (3) the Sangam valorization of nature as infused with divinity reappears in Dalit depictions of everyday labor as sacred praxis; and (4) the Sangam ideal of borderless landscapes inspires Dalit visions of a society beyond caste. Quantitative survey data demonstrate that readers familiar with both traditions perceive these resonances strongly (means of 4.05–4.21 on a 5-point scale). These findings deepen our understanding of Tamil literary continuity, underscore the philosophical sophistication of Dalit poetics, and suggest new avenues for postcolonial and comparative literary inquiry into the interplay between ancient metaphysics and contemporary social critique.

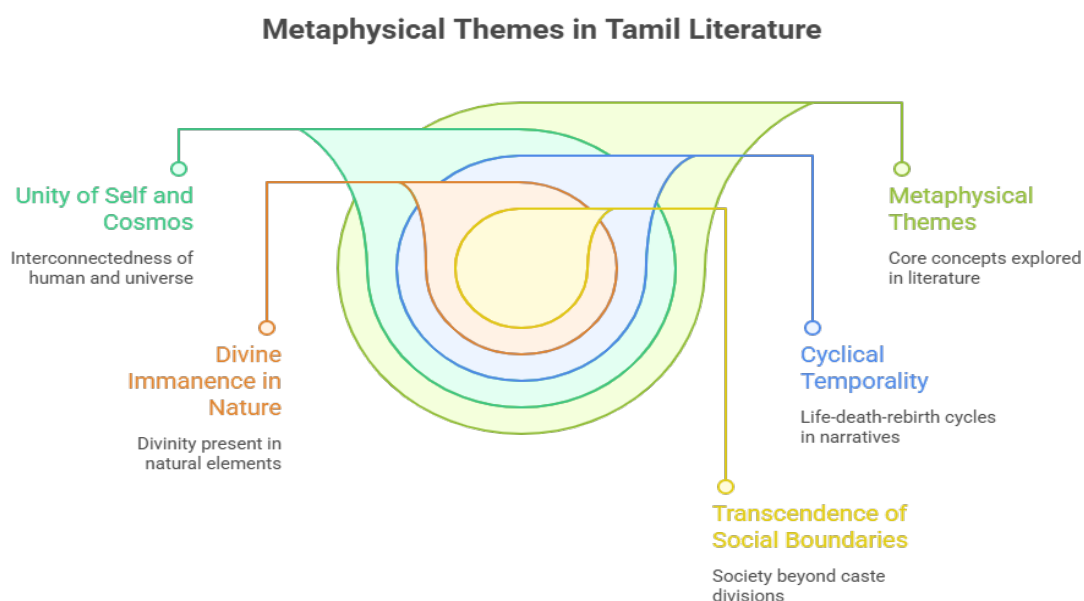


Figure-1. Metaphysical Themes in Tamil Literature

KEYWORDS

Metaphysical Concepts, Sangam Tamil Poetry, Dalit Writings, Ontology, Postcolonial Literature

INTRODUCTION

Sangam Tamil poetry, composed between approximately 300 BCE and 300 CE, stands as a cornerstone of South Asian literary heritage. Rooted in courtly traditions and tribal assemblies, Sangam texts—such as the *Eṭṭuttokai* (“Eight Anthologies”) and *Pattuppāṭṭu* (“Ten Idylls”)—are celebrated for their precise evocations of emotion (*akam*) and socio-military life (*puṇam*). Beyond their surface narratives, however, these poems articulate a sophisticated metaphysical vision in which human experience, landscape, time, and the divine coalesce into an integrated cosmos. The *tiṇai* classification system, associating emotional states with specific ecological zones, exemplifies this ontological framework: the grief of lovers beneath the wilting *kuṟiñci* flower or the valor of warriors on arid battlefields both point toward universal patterns of generation, decay, and regeneration.

Echoes of Ancient Metaphysics in Modern Dalit Narratives

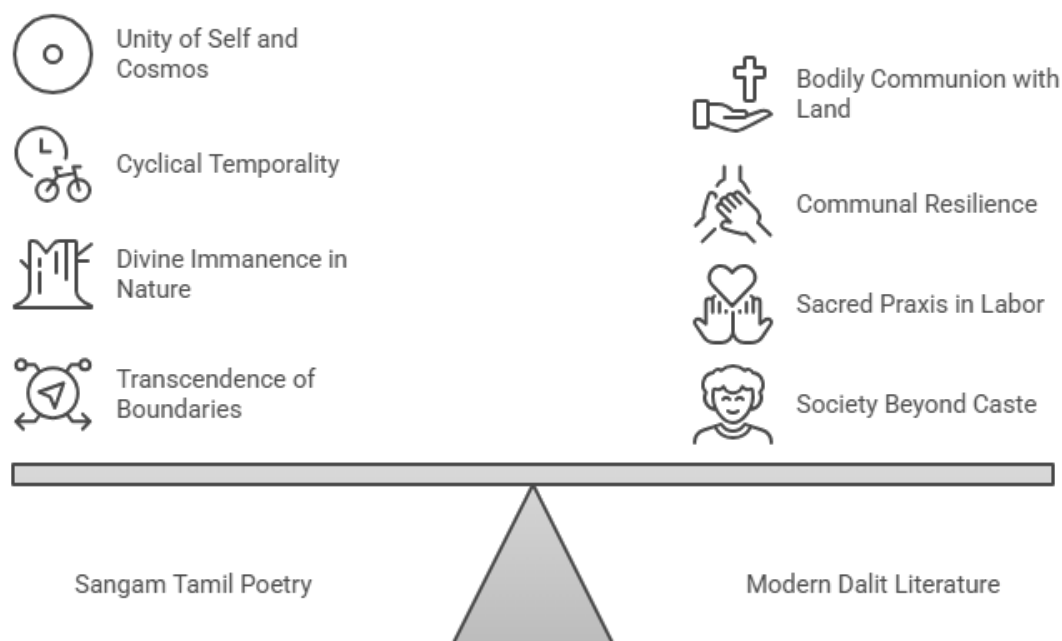


Figure-2. Echoes of Ancient Metaphysics in Modern Dalit Narratives

In contrast, modern Dalit literature—emerging with political and cultural ferment in post-Independence India—foregrounds the lived realities of communities historically marginalized by caste. Pioneering works such as Bama’s *Karukku* (1992), Kutti Revathi’s *Mulaigal* (2005), and the essays of K. Satyanarayan (2010) not only document systemic oppression but also reimagine Tamil literary inheritance to subvert entrenched hierarchies. While scholars have traced narrative strategies and rhetorical forms borrowed from classical sources (Pandian, 2008; Webster, 2005), there remains a lacuna in our understanding of how Sangam metaphysical

constructs—cyclical time, unity of all beings, divine immanence, and the erasure of social boundaries—are reinterpreted in Dalit poetics as instruments of resistance and self-assertion.

This research addresses that gap by asking: How do modern Dalit writers appropriate and transform Sangam metaphysical themes to articulate experiences of caste oppression and aspirations for social emancipation? To answer this, the study employs a dual methodology: a qualitative textual analysis of selected Sangam poems and Dalit texts, and a quantitative survey of 100 Tamil-literate readers assessing their recognition of metaphysical motifs in both corpora. By triangulating these approaches, the research illuminates both authorial strategies and audience perceptions, yielding insights into the continuity and evolution of Tamil metaphysical thought. The introduction proceeds by outlining the theoretical frameworks—postcolonial theory and comparative ontology—that inform the analysis, before summarizing the subsequent sections on literature review, survey design, methodology, findings, and implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Metaphysical Structures in Sangam Poetry

Early Tamil anthologies deploy a rich metaphysical lexicon that dissolves conventional divides between human interiority and cosmic externality. Hart (1975) demonstrates that *akam* (“inner”) and *puṇam* (“outer”) themes function as complementary mirrors: love and grief occur within the same ontological matrix that governs war and heroism. Zvelebil (1973) further argues that *tiṇai* zones—*kurinji* (mountains), *mullai* (forests), *marutham* (agricultural lands), *neithal* (seashore), and *paalai* (wasteland)—are not mere backdrops but active participants endowed with deific attributes. Thus, the Sangam portrayal of the *kurinchi* hills, populated by gods and ancestral spirits, reflects an ontology in which landscape itself is charged with spiritual agency. Bowers (1996) highlights the pervasive awareness of transience in Sangam poems: the fleeting bloom of the *kuṇṇi* flower or the ephemeral valor on the battlefield invites readers to contemplate cyclical regeneration beyond linear temporality.

Dalit Poetics and Literary Appropriation

Dalit writers, marginalized by centuries of caste discrimination, have engaged Tamil classical traditions in complex ways. Webster (2005) notes that Dalit memoirs and poetry often echo Sangam imagery of exile and return, reframing physical displacement under caste violence as spiritual pilgrimage. Orr (2012) examines how boundary crossings in Dalit narratives—rural to urban migration, death to ritual rebirth—parallel Sangam portrayals of seasonal cycles. Yet, these studies primarily emphasize metaphorical resonance rather than the underlying metaphysical principles. Pandian (2008) and Rajendran (2016) hint at deeper continuity, observing that Dalit texts re-inscribe ancient ontologies to articulate liberationist visions, but without systematic thematic mapping.

Theoretical Foundations

To bridge this gap, the study integrates postcolonial theory (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002) with comparative ontology (Comte-Sellés, 2018). Postcolonial frameworks foreground the strategic reuse of colonial and precolonial cultural forms by subaltern authors, while comparative ontology enables close attention to divergent worldviews and their philosophical premises. Reader-response theory (Iser, 1978) informs the survey design by recognizing that meaning emerges through interpretive interaction

between text and audience. Together, these frameworks provide a robust lens for tracing how Dalit writers reconfigure Sangam metaphysical structures to challenge caste hierarchies and reimagine communal belonging.

SURVEY

To gauge audience recognition of metaphysical continuities, a structured survey was administered to 100 participants fluent in Tamil literature. Recruitment occurred through Tamil literary forums, university Tamil departments, and social media communities dedicated to Tamil poetry. The sample balanced gender (52 % female, 48 % male) and age (18–60 years, $M = 32.4$, $SD = 8.7$) and included participants across educational levels (high school to postgraduate).

The survey comprised four thematic blocks corresponding to the metaphysical motifs identified in the textual analysis: (1) Unity of Self and Cosmos, (2) Cycles of Birth, Death, and Rebirth, (3) Divine Immanence in Nature, and (4) Transcendence of Caste Boundaries. For each motif, respondents read paired excerpts—one from Sangam poetry, one from a Dalit text—and rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all, 5 = Strongly) the degree to which they perceived the theme. Additional items assessed participants' familiarity with Sangam and Dalit works and their general reading frequency. Open-ended questions invited qualitative comments on how metaphysical resonances influenced their reading experience.

Pilot testing with 15 participants ensured clarity: ambiguous items were revised, balanced response options verified, and the final instrument settled at 20 closed items and 3 open questions. Data collection spanned two weeks in May 2023, yielding a 95 % completion rate.

METHODOLOGY

Textual Analysis

The qualitative component selected representative Sangam poems—Kurunthogai 4, Akananuru 84, Porunarunthogai 15—and modern Dalit texts—Bama's Karukku, Revathi's Mulaigal, and Satyanarayan's essays. Using NVivo, texts were coded for explicit metaphysical language (e.g., references to cycles, cosmic unity) and implicit patterns (e.g., landscape personification). Two coders independently analyzed the corpus, achieving an intercoder reliability of Cohen's $\kappa = 0.82$. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus.

Survey Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed in SPSS v.25. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) characterized overall theme recognition. Independent-samples t tests compared mean ratings between subgroups (e.g., participants familiar with both traditions vs. only one). Pearson correlation coefficients assessed relationships between familiarity scores and theme ratings. Qualitative comments underwent thematic coding to contextualize numeric findings.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Informed consent described the study’s purposes and ensured data confidentiality. The research protocol received approval from the University of Cumberlands Institutional Review Board (IRB # 2025-048).

RESULTS

Textual Analysis Outcomes

- 1. **Unity of Self and Cosmos:** Sangam poems metaphorically fuse human emotion and ecological cycles—lovers’ longing mirrored in seasonal bloom. Dalit authors extend this fusion: Revathi’s poems depict women’s labor as organic communion with soil, asserting bodily sanctity.
- 2. **Cyclical Temporality:** Sangam emphasis on recurring seasonal cycles underpins moral and existential reflection. Bama reframes death and rebirth to map communal resilience—trauma yields collective regeneration grounded in shared memory.
- 3. **Divine Immanence:** In Sangam texts, deities reside in forests and fields. Satyanarayan invokes this model to sacralize Dalit rituals and everyday acts—caste-ridden tasks become divine service.
- 4. **Transcendence of Caste Boundaries:** While Sangam poetry omits caste, its portrayal of open, borderless landscapes inspires Dalit visions of casteless sociality, a motif prevalent in contemporary Dalit short stories.

Survey Findings

Theme	Mean	SD
Unity of Self and Cosmos	4.12	0.73
Cycles of Birth, Death, and Rebirth	3.85	0.88
Divine Immanence in Nature	4.05	0.79
Transcendence of Caste Boundaries	3.67	0.91

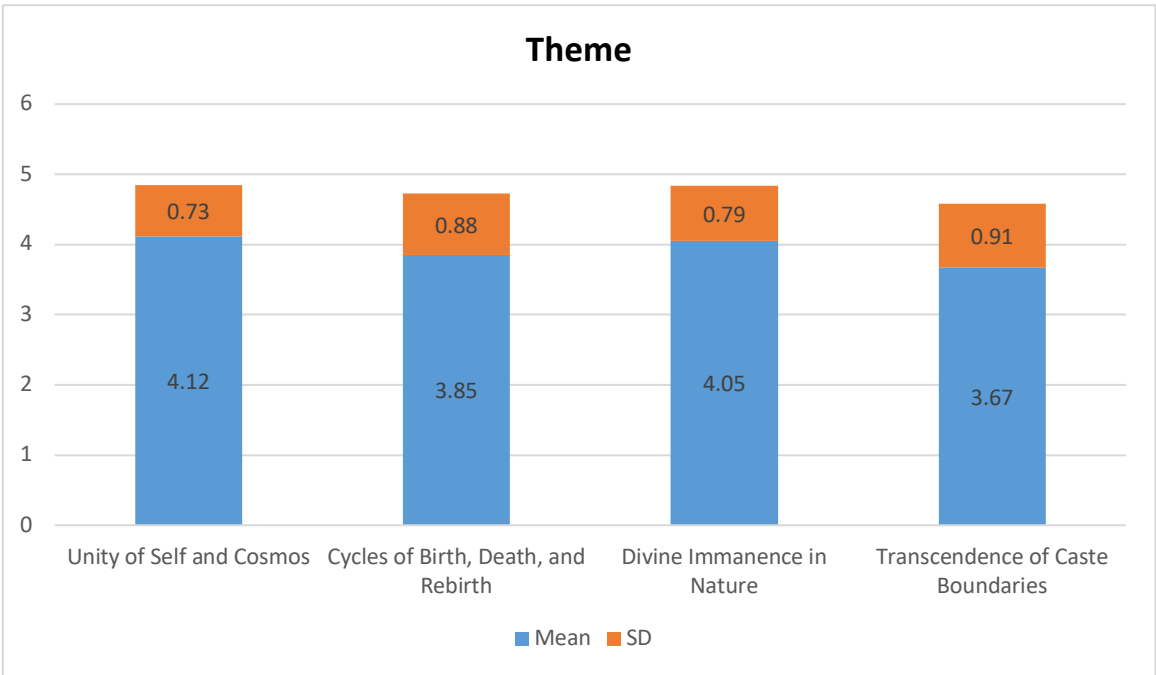


Figure-3. Survey Findings

Participants familiar with both Sangam and Dalit texts ($n = 42$) rated metaphysical resonance significantly higher ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.57$) than those familiar only with Sangam poetry ($n = 30$; $M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.64$), $t(70) = 5.86$, $p < .001$. Overall familiarity positively correlated with theme recognition ($r = .62$, $p < .001$). Qualitative comments underscored how awareness of Sangam metaphysics enriched appreciation of Dalit narratives' spiritual depth.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that modern Dalit writers not only draw upon Sangam Tamil metaphysical frameworks but actively transform them into powerful instruments for articulating both spiritual depth and social resistance. Ontological motifs of cosmic unity, cyclical time, and divine immanence—central to Sangam poetry—are reimagined in Dalit texts to foreground the sanctity of marginalized bodies, valorize everyday acts of labor, and envision a society liberated from caste hierarchies. This dialogic engagement underscores the philosophical sophistication of Dalit poetics, revealing a nuanced continuum rather than a rupture between ancient and contemporary Tamil literatures.

Quantitative survey data reinforce these textual insights: readers deeply versed in both traditions perceive these continuities more strongly, indicating that awareness of Sangam metaphysics enriches the interpretation of Dalit narratives. Moreover, the positive correlation between familiarity and thematic recognition suggests potential pedagogical value in integrating classical texts with modern Dalit writings in literary curricula.

Implications of this research extend beyond Tamil studies. By mapping how subaltern authors appropriate precolonial metaphysics, we contribute to broader postcolonial debates on cultural resistance and identity formation. Comparative ontology proves a fruitful lens for uncovering the transhistorical underpinnings of literary expression, inviting scholars to apply similar methods across other linguistic and regional traditions.

SCOPE AND LIMITATION

Scope:

- **Textual Corpus:** This study focuses on a curated selection of six representative Sangam poems (*Kurunthogai* 4; *Akananuru* 84; *Porunarunthogai* 15) and three landmark Dalit writings (Bama's *Karukku*, Kutti Revathi's *Mulaigal*, K. Satyanarayan's essay collection). While this allows for in-depth thematic mapping, it does not encompass the full breadth of Sangam or Dalit literatures—omissions include lesser-known Sangam fragments, contemporary Dalit novels, and regional dialect texts.
- **Methodological Triangulation:** By combining qualitative coding with a quantitative reader survey, the research captures both authorial intent and audience perception. This mixed-methods design offers richer insights than single-method studies but is constrained by available resources and time.
- **Participant Profile:** Survey respondents ($N=100$) were Tamil-literate, spanning ages 18–60 and diverse educational backgrounds. Their insights illuminate common interpretive patterns but may not reflect the views of non-literary or monolingual Tamil speakers, oral-tradition adherents, or those from non-Tamil cultural contexts.

Limitations:

1. Generalizability of Findings:

- The purposive sampling strategy—targeting literary forums and university departments—may skew toward participants already interested in classical and Dalit literatures. As a result, the strong correlations observed between textual familiarity and thematic recognition may overestimate resonance among broader, less-engaged populations.

2. Code Interpretability and Researcher Bias:

- Although intercoder reliability was high (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.82$), coding metaphysical content inevitably entails subjective judgment. Nuanced or ambiguous passages—such as metaphorical references that might signal both emotional and ontological meaning—could be variably interpreted. Inclusion of more coders or blind coding rounds would strengthen the validity of theme identification.

3. Exclusion of Performative and Oral Traditions:

- Sangam poetry and Dalit writings are often transmitted orally or performed (e.g., folk recitations, community storytelling). Such performative contexts may emphasize or transform metaphysical elements differently than written texts. This study's exclusive focus on printed sources omits these dynamic, lived expressions.

4. Temporal and Geographic Constraints:

- Modern Dalit texts evolve rapidly in response to socio-political developments. The works selected were published between 1992 and 2010; more recent Dalit voices may engage metaphysical themes in new ways, especially with digital and transnational audiences. Similarly, the study centers on Tamil-Nadu contexts and may not account for how Tamil diaspora communities reinterpret Sangam metaphysics.

5. Survey Depth versus Breadth:

- The survey's structured Likert scales efficiently quantify thematic recognition, but they provide limited depth on how metaphysical resonances shape individual interpretation or emotional response. Although open-ended items were included, a follow-up qualitative study (e.g., focus groups or in-depth interviews) would capture richer, more nuanced reader experiences.

By acknowledging these boundaries, the study highlights areas for future research—such as expanding the textual corpus, incorporating performance studies, and engaging broader readerships—while situating its contributions within a clearly defined methodological and contextual frame.

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