

Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan*: Tamil Modernity, Revivalism and the Popular Historical Novel

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Abstract: The *Ponniyin Selvan* (*Ponni's Son*) novels by Kalki, serialized from 1950 to 1954 and set during the medieval ages in the Tamil country against the backdrop of a power struggle between and within the two South Indian dynasties of the Cholas and the Pandyas, during the reign of Parantaka II (also known as Sundara Chola) roughly from 958 CE to 973 CE, represent a format of the historical novel that addressed the post-independence anxieties about language, tradition and regional identity within popular Tamil print culture in the 1940s and 1950s. Kalki's historical romances were written amidst specific socio-political movements that gained momentum in the early and mid-twentieth century. This article situates the revivalist and reformist agendas espoused by nationalists such as Kalki in the twentieth century within the context of the ideological shifts and turbulences in Tamil political and public spheres concerning Tamil language and literary history, through an analysis of the *Ponniyin Selvan* series as a representative text of this shifting context of Tamil identity formation, as a popular historical novel and a collective memory text.

Keywords: Kalki, fictions of memory, nostalgia, Revivalism, Dravidianism, Tamil modernity, collective text

“Kalki” Krishnamurthy's *Ponniyin Selvan* (*Ponni's Son*) is a multi-volume historical novel set in the backdrop of the succession crises in the Chola dynasty in tenth century AD. These novels were serialized in the author's own magazine *Kalki* from 1950 to 1954. Immensely popular at the time of their publication, they were subsequently consolidated into five volumes in 1955. During the 1940s, the period when Kalki's historical romances were serialized, the magazine's circulation reached 71,000 every week, the highest for any weekly periodical in the country (Sunda 13). They are arguably the most popular historical novels in Tamil and still continue to be read and reprinted in different editions. The recent film adaptation proved to be a commercial success, spawning several more translations of the novels. It is in the context of its growing popularity and resonance across generations that this article aims to read *Ponniyin Selvan* as a vehicle and repository of collective memory. This article, thus, proposes to situate these novels within the matrix of the Tamil Revivalist movement and the Dravidian movement of the first half of the twentieth century which decisively shaped the politics and the boundaries of the state of Tamil Nadu for the subsequent decades. In doing so, it further highlights the role that cultural memory plays within the contradictory impulses of modernity, manifested as the concurrent desire for progress and the nostalgia for tradition, as those who would uphold Tamil cultural pride “consciously and strategically recuperated the archaic in the very name of the modern nation.” (Ramaswamy, “Fabulous Geographies” 16) The author Kalki will therefore also be situated in the historiographical tradition of Tamil modernity in order to productively engage with his fictional work that had strong historical, cultural as well as political undertones.

Ramaswamy Krishnamurthy, better known by his pen name Kalki, was an Indian writer, journalist, poet, critic and Indian independence activist. He wrote essays, short stories and political tracts in

popular journals and magazines of the 1930s, '40s and '50s such as *Navasakthi*, *Vimochanam* and *Ananda Vikatan* and founded his own magazine *Kalki* in 1941. His novels of nationalism, social-realism and medieval history were serialized in these magazines. Kalki's deliberate choice in writing about a critical era in the centuries-long Chola dynasty, reminiscent of the fraught period in post-Independence Tamil Nadu seems to be based on the implication that chaos inevitably precedes and follows 'glorious' historical moments. The tensions and contradictions within the narrative of the text must be examined in relation to Kalki's own politics and his situation within Tamil modernity. The *Ponniyin Selvan* novels reflect the emergence of certain forms of historical research, artwork and political mobilization in Tamil Nadu during the 1940s and the ways in which people constructed a sense of the past that represented the transformation in their lived realities. The concept of 'collective texts', in this article, is meant to describe literature's function as a circulation medium that disseminates and shapes cultural memory and the *Ponniyin Selvan* novels in Tamil Nadu continue to act as a popular medium. The novels are essentially a sequence of conspiracies and political intrigues that supposedly dominated the final days of the reign of King Parantaka II (also known as Sundara Chola) who ruled roughly from 958 CE to 973 CE. The primary conflict surrounding the question of succession is further complicated by attacks and assassination plots from the neighboring kingdom of the Pandyas.

The Cholas who largely form the cast of characters of these novels were an ancient South Indian dynasty whose legacy continues to be marked through place names in Tamil Nadu and literary and film dramatizations of the high points of their reign. They are part of the Southern dynasty triumvirate—the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas—who dominate the popular understanding and imagining of the medieval landscape of South India. The Cholas, like the Pandyas, were renowned for, among other things, their patronage of the arts and literature; and in turn, the poets composed songs and verses of the various feats of the kings and sometimes the upheavals within their governance. They used Tamil as an official state language, along with Sanskrit; and the poets they patronized created a courtly milieu in which several of the Tamil literary masterpieces were composed. The Cholas also feature extensively in the canon of Sangam literature, the earliest known literature in South India, which is now an important part of collective Tamil consciousness in the modern Dravidianist culture and politics of Tamil Nadu.

Cultural Memory and Tamil Revivalism through the Novel

It is important to highlight the role of Tamil revivalism in canonizing and propagating a specific image of ancient Tamil history and civilization. Tamil politicians of the post-independence era often used the Chola reign as a symbol of a utopian Dravidian nation and at times publicly attributed their understanding of ancient Tamil history to Kalki's novels at political rallies and in their pamphlets. Su Venkatesan, a writer and politician says that *Ponniyin Selvan* was first published at a time when Tamilians were rediscovering their identity.

It could have been unintentional that the novel was serialized at a time when the Dravidian movement was gaining ground in Tamil Nadu. When the politics of culture was being mainstreamed, *Ponniyin Selvan* sat well with it. Until it was published, many of us knew of Cholas only through Sangam poetry, which did not give a complete picture. *Ponniyin Selvan* brought to us the vast and fertile culture of Chola dynasty in all its glory. In that sense, it was complete.

The rhetoric of collective memory as an ensemble of narrative forms which provokes "the naturalization of a literary text as a medium of memory" as defined by Astrid Erll is reflected in Kalki's memory-making texts. According to Erll, literature permeates and resonates in memory culture and literary texts fulfil a multitude of mnemonic functions, such as the imaginative creation of past lifeworlds, the transmission of images of history, the negotiation of competing memories, and the reflection about processes and problems of cultural memory (Erll 157). By his own admission to his

friends and contemporaries, Kalki wanted to promote popular interest in Tamil history and share his own research into and passion for Tamil political and cultural history. He includes in *Ponniyin Selvan*, references to the historical ruins and monuments to fallen warriors in different parts of Tamil Nadu that he visited as part of his research. For instance, he refers to the practice of building memorial temples called Pallipadai in Tamil villages, for war heroes: "In those days, it was a practice to build memorial temples for war heroes. These temples were called Pallipadai. Near Kudandhai, there was a small village called Thirupurampayam, where a Pallipadai was built for the Ganga King Prathivipithan, in memory of his heroic deeds in the gory wars that took place here." (Krishnamurthy 130; Vol. 1)

Literary historiography in Tamil Nadu has been an important exercise in reclaiming Tamil cultural identity in the years immediately preceding and succeeding Indian independence from British colonialism. If cultural memory can be defined as "the characteristic store of repeatedly used texts, images and rituals in the cultivation of which each society and epoch stabilizes and imports its self-image; a collectively shared knowledge of preferably (yet not exclusively) the past, on which a group bases its awareness of unity and character" (Assman and Czaplicka 125–133), then the cultivation of a collective self-image in modern Tamil Nadu can be attributed to the evolution of reading, writing, and artistic production in the turn of the twentieth century. Soon after the Tamil publishing industry established itself there was a slew of journals, periodicals, and serialized novels in print, along with the compiling and publication of centuries-old archived literary classics¹. This led to a Tamil Revivalism in literature, art and cinema from the 1930s onwards, emerging from the work of scholars on Tamil language and literature in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Around sixty periodicals in Tamil were launched in the next two decades. While many of these journals were also staunchly nationalistic and carried cartoons lampooning the British administration, the rediscovery and publication of classics of the Sangam period—circa third to fifth century AD—by U.V Swaminatha Aiyar in 1900, brought to light a 'glorious' part of Tamil history. Literary dialogue glorifying Tamil language and culture became an element of literary, theatrical, and filmic entertainment (Bhaskaran 52).

The publication of the Sangam classics² and the historical visions this process inspired were very rapidly recruited 'to fashion a new identity for Tamils' at the very first tentative signs of Tamil nationalism, with language at the center of its program. Linguism or language-based ethnicity was never dominant in premodern India—though, according to David Shulman, there is at least one example of *tamilar*, the 'Tamils', serving as a collective socio-cultural category in the medieval South. By the early twentieth century, identity-driven linguism was a major force in the Tamil country and has remained so to this day. The re-entry into circulation of the Sangam classics generated a new literary canon, which is often identified as a product of secularization—since the regnant canon of premodern times was largely organized around a hierarchy of religious texts. However, it is not so much that Tamil literature was secularized at the turn of the twentieth century as that it was radically nationalized and appropriated by a rising, largely non-Brahmin, non-Dalit elite (Shulman 306). There has been a substantial output of literary writing from Dalit writers and non-Brahmin non-Dalit caste groups in recent years and progressive movements within the state have changed the composition of academic and literary circles, though not to a large extent. The scholarly and creative writing pantheon of modern Tamil Nadu involves a significant number of upper caste writers, and Kalki's positioning as a Brahmin intellectual is significant in this context.

The Tamil Renaissance movement originating in 1905 co-existed with a non-Brahmin movement built on the legacy of the missionaries and later evolving into Dravidian nationalism. The proliferation of research into ancient Tamil culture at the turn of the nineteenth century also consequently led to a significant output in studies on ancient Tamil literature along with the increased popularity of historical fiction in the first half of the twentieth century. Kalki's historical romances were written for a prodigious and eager magazine readership and evolved amidst specific socio-

political movements. In different eras within the late 19th and 20th centuries to the present day, *Tamil Thanmai* or Tamilness “as a sense of being and a sense of self, has been historically constructed through an evocation of antiquity. This evocation oscillates between mythology and history.” (Arasu 23)

In the representative novels and films of these decades, reformist values coexist with cultural orthodoxies and Dravidian regionalism is offset by a nationalist agenda. The ancient past of the country and the past of the Tamil people were reimagined in order to suit the nationalist and Dravidian political agenda. This is evident in films such as *Mathrubhoomi (Motherland)* (1939) which was based on Alexander’s invasion of India, an allegory to the British conquest and occupation of India. This near-mythical historical consciousness is also present in *Mandhirikumari (The Minister’s Daughter)* (1950), an adaptation of one of the five Tamil classic epics, *Kundalakesi*, but with a distinct rationalist edge, particularly in the dialogues of the Dravidian movement ideologue M.Karunanidhi who would subsequently become chief minister of Tamil Nadu for five intermittent terms.

Tamil Modernity, Dravidian Identity and Literature

The *Ponniyin Selvan* novels were written at a time when the influence of the nationalist movement was waning and a modern, more political form of the Dravidian movement was gaining currency in mainstream society. The origins of the Dravidian Movement are often traced to the late nineteenth century with the articulation of a linguistic identity and self-affirmation for those that spoke Dravidian languages and lived in the southern peninsula of the Indian subcontinent – the colonial Madras Presidency. While those speaking other Dravidian languages were participants and leaders too, the different groups/leaders/campaigns/publications that made up this movement were predominantly connected to the Tamil language. The history of language-based identity politics in Tamil Nadu has a long trajectory, by no means limited to the twentieth century. The movement and its broad political principles were consolidated from the 1920s onwards, in the work and personhood of E.V. Ramasamy Naicker who was given the title of Periyar, meaning Elder. The term ‘Dravidian Movement’, represented by a few key leaders and their organizations/parties, is a useful way to describe the fundamental linguistic identity formation that has remained at the core of public politics in Tamil Nadu since the late 19th century (Arasu 4).

Periyar’s Dravidar Kazhagam (Dravidian Federation [DK]) is often categorized as a “classically modernist movement” in the sense of distinguishing itself from what is considered a moribund ‘tradition’ (that is, Brahminism) and proposing a new, enlightenment-based philosophy of self-respect (*suyamariyathai*) and rationalism (*pakutharivu*) that would wipe away the irrationalities of caste and gender oppression. This, in addition to the marriage of linguism with long-standing social and economic resentment, and consequences of the recovery of Sangam-period Tamil, created and shaped a potent matrix for political action—but not without drawing on much deeper roots than the colonial period phenomena apparent on the surface (Shulman 215). Kalki’s popular historical novels were written in the context of a cultural renaissance (*marumaracci*) in modern Tamil Nadu. They are however more reflective of a form of collective memory that Sumathi Ramasamy terms “compensatory,” the aim of which was to demonstrate that “Hindu” or “Indian” civilization had emerged from a “harmonious commingling of the cultures of the Dravidian and the Indo Aryan”. Tamil, it was insisted, “was quite as classical” as Sanskrit, and its literature “is no less ancient, noble, and vast.” Tamil and its literature were thus validated by espousing a parity with Sanskrit, whose value was never questioned. Neither is the divide between “Aryan” and “Dravidian,” seen as distinctive but complementary halves of “India,” nor the legitimacy of the Brahmin (who were often heavily criticised by Dravidianist movements). As can be expected, compensatory classicism was a strategy that was favoured typically, though not always, by devotees who were nominally Brahmin, such as C. Rajagopalachari³ and his disciple Kalki. Their commitment was to a syncretic Indian civilization jointly produced by the “genius” of Tamil and the “genius” of Sanskrit, both of which are necessary and complementary (“Passions” 43).

Kalki's writings are not in accordance with the precepts of the *Tanitamil* (separate Tamil) movement, popularized during his time by prominent literary figures, which was based on linguistic purity and the avoidance of loan words from Sanskrit and English. Kalki, deliberately or incidentally, uses a wide variety of Sanskrit phrases and words in his novels. His centering of the perspective of the Cholas (who supposedly used both Sanskrit and Tamil as court languages) and his positioning of the Pandyas (who are associated with a form of 'purer' Tamil antiquity) as antagonists become significant in this regard.

Kalki's inclusion of nationalist themes contributed to the respectability of the then-maligned novel form and though hostile to the larger schemes of the Dravidian movement, he capitalized on the spirit of Tamil revivalism and cultural pride through his historical novels that are still in print. *Thyagabhoomi* (*Land of Sacrifice*) was his earlier, widely-read and serialized novel that was immediately turned into a film. Both the novel and the film adaptation gained notoriety due to their nationalistic overtones, with a ban being imposed on the film by the colonial government that succeeded in making it all the more popular when the Indian National Congress came to power and censorship of patriotic films was virtually suspended. Kalki while accepting of the liberal aspects of the Gandhian movement was cautious and conservative with regards to the Dravidian movement and was part of a literary wing established by the Congress politician C. Rajagopalachari where "they tried to construct a Tamil tradition which excluded Sangam literature and the medieval scholastic commentaries. *Kambaramayanam* (a classical Tamil retelling of the *Ramayana* by the poet Kambar) was given a central place and Tamil literary tradition constructed around it"⁴ (Venkatachalapathy, "In those days" 96). There was a direct contradiction between the canon-forming impulses of those who favored texts with religious overtones (a group Kalki allied himself with) and those who preferred texts that reflected a more secular or atheistic worldview.

The Popular Historical Novel in Tamil

In all, Kalki wrote three considerably popular historical romances extolling the achievement of the Pallava and Chola dynasties—*Parthiban Kanavu* (Parthiban's Dream) in 1941, *Sivagamiyin Sapatam* (Sivgami's Vow) in 1944, and *Ponniyin Selvan* in 1950. *Ponniyin Selvan* was subsequently published as an epic novel series of five parts titled *Pudhuvellam* (Fresh Floods), *Suzhatrkaatru* (Whirlpool), *Kolaivazh* (Sword of Slaughter), *Manimaganudam* (The Jewelled Crown) and *Thyaga Sikaram* (Epitome of Sacrifice) respectively. With Kalki the contradiction—which emerged in the Tamil cultural sphere on account of the rise of the novel—was more or less resolved in accord with the preferred goals of the middle class:

The 'positive' aspects of popular fiction had been successfully appropriated: thrill, suspense, gripping narrative, pace, unexpected twists, facile prose, sentiment and melodrama were to be found in good measure in the Kalkian variety of fiction. All these were kept within limits, being deployed in controlled doses to excite and consequently deaden taste and imagination, but never to exceed the boundaries of middle-class gentility. (Venkatachalapathy, "The Province of the Book" 96)

Historical novels have often been associated with the formation and establishment of a political identity, whether it be national or regional. The history and popularity of the historical novel in India has been studied by critics like Meenakshi Mukherjee who have highlighted the role of Victorian popular fiction in determining the literary interests of the English-educated nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian. In nineteenth-century Europe, the historical novel also became a dominant memory genre which represented the course of history and helped shape national identities. Similarly in the late nineteenth century India, a new and unprecedented interest in history can be seen to be shared between Indian writers of fiction and their readers ("Realism and Reality" 39). The search for a distinctive regionalism that involves a unique linguistic identity simultaneous with national identity can be identified in the vernacular writings of this time.

Akhila Ramnarayan, in her study titled *Kalki's Avatars: Writing Nation, History, Region and Culture in the Tamil Public Sphere* views the sheer volume of historical fiction generated by Kalki, the enthused response of his audiences, and the spate of historical novels and novelists that followed in his wake as reflecting a strong revivalist turn in the Tamil literary sphere, a response to similar movements across British India but also an indication of a compensatory/contestatory linguistic regionalism. She also lists "recreation of the past, complete erasure of colonial presence, and harking back to a Tamil golden age through romanticized description" as Kalki's trademark (104). Such characterizations indicate that Kalki's work embodies a distinctive form of interventionist literature from the nationalist period that was nevertheless peculiar to the Tamil context. His work was necessarily riddled with contradictions owing to prevailing tensions between nation and region (105). His work is also marked by a desire to situate Tamil history and culture within a framework of significance accorded to global and national historical events. While introducing the consequences of a battle fought in the medieval Tamil country he states, "Many famous battles have changed the course of history, for example, the Battle of Waterloo or The Wars of Panipat, etc. In the same way, the war that was fought near Thirupurampayam changed the course of Tamil history" (Krishnamurthy 131; Vol.2)

The popular novelists like Kalki and Sandilyan who either avoided or rejected the claims of the Dravidian movement often constructed an equally populist vision of the past where benevolent kings dealt fairly with tyrants and usurpers, patronized poets and watched over their subjects. These tales of bravery, treachery, betrayal and sacrifice coincided with the rise of magazines where they could be serialized and offered as entertainment with a romanticized version of the past at a time of cultural transformation and anxiety. Narrative psychologists have pointed out that novels, with their conventionalized plot-lines and highly suggestive myths, provide powerful, often normative models for our own self-narration and interpretation of the past. Historical accuracy is not one of the concerns of such "memory-making" novels and movies; instead, they cater to the public with what is variously termed "authenticity" or "truthfulness". They create images of the past which resonate with cultural memory (Erl 389). The political nexus of film and literature within the state played a significant role in the construction of certain "fictions of memory" that circulated within the cultural landscape of that time period. 'Fictions of memory', according to Brigit Neumann are "the stories that individuals or cultures tell about their past to answer the question "who am I?" or, collectively, "who are we?" These stories are called 'fictions of memory' because, more often than not they turn out to be an imaginative (re)construction of the past in response to current needs (Neumann 333-334). These 'fictions of memory' also proved to be very lucrative as evidenced by the strategy of the movie mogul S.S. Vasan who acquired the flailing *Ananda Vikatan* magazine and revived it with "a successful mix of humour, fiction, and cartoons with a dash of nationalism" (Venkatachalapathy, "The Province of the Book" 95), recruiting Kalki to write his immensely saleable historical novels.

Tamil Cultural Identity and Anxiety

The story of the *Ponniyin Selvan* novels unfolds over the course of an eventful year and follows the adventures of Vallavariyan Vandiya Devan, a picaresque hero, acting as a spy for the swashbuckling Chola princes Aditya Karikalan and Arulmozhivaraman. The latter is the titular 'Ponniyin Selvan' historically known as the legendary Chola king Raja Raja Chola. "Ponni" is one of the names of River Kaveri, another important marker of Tamil cultural identity, and a site of dispute with the neighboring state of Karnataka. The river is described in affectionate terms and sometimes anthropomorphized over the course of the novel, becoming a symbol of Chola, and by extension Tamil, prosperity: "River Ponni! Is there a young woman in our kingdom who has not been elated by your presence? Could there be anyone in this world who is not enamored by your beauty?" (Krishnamurthy 75; Vol. 1). Prince Arulmozhivarman is referred to as "Ponni's son" as he had been rescued in his childhood from drowning by a mysterious woman who many superstitiously believe

to a personification of the river Kaveri. The prince's mythical status as heir to the Chola dynasty, despite being the second son, is thus established through his rebirth by water. Kalki designates the river as a memorative sign throughout the narrative through descriptions such as the following:

Two thousand years ago, the great King Karikala Cholan built the banks of Kaveri River on both the sides. The banks protected the land for many years from river floods. However, when the Pandyas and Pallavas rose to power, the Cholas' star declined. When the kingdom was torn apart by war, there was no one to safeguard the land from flooding river waters. This resulted in floods that changed the geography of the river. (Krishnamurthy 277; Vol. 1)

The river has become, in Bakhtinian terms, a chronotope, a point "in the geography of a community where time and space intersect and fuse" and "where through the agency of historical tales, their intersection is made visible for human contemplation." (Bakhtin 58)

The adventures of the prince's friend and protagonist Vandiya Devan in increasingly extravagant escapades, lead him to uncover royal scandals, conspiracies by rival rulers, and sometimes implausible secrets of parentage and inheritance. Kalki's writing clearly borrowed from the tropes of the sensational Victorian novels, popular among the English-educated Indian bourgeoisie of that time, which typically included mistaken identities, courtly secrets and damsels in distress.

Over the course of his historical novels, Kalki invokes indigenous performance traditions and multilingual, multigenre storytelling practices within the framework of the historical romance to widen its generic scope (Ramnarayan 42). The narrative of *Ponniyin Selvan* intersperses songs from the Tamil oral tradition with verses from saints of the Tamil Bhakti movement. There are also included various descriptions and references to Tamil performance art forms such as *Kuravaikoothu*, *Villupaattu*, *Paraiyattam* etc. Kalki's monarchs are often characterised as flawed but learned men who are patrons of the arts. In fact, the characteristic of a villainous individual in power, in Kalki's historical novels, happens to be their denigration of the arts and artists. In *Ponniyin Selvan*, there is an entire chapter devoted to the ailing king Sundara Chola's patronage of court poets. Kalki frequently mentions and quotes from iconic works of Tamil literature such as the *Tolkapiyam*, *Thirukkural* and *Gilapathikaram* and occasionally from the canon of Sangam poetry. He also signals to the 'greatness' of Tamil tradition through references to the sage Agastiyar, Appar the iconic Saivite Saint of the Bhakti movement, the Vaishnavite Andal and other writers of the devotional and literary traditions of Tamil Nadu. ("The people had a special respect for Sage Agastya and worshipped him as the 'Father of Tamil Language' and had built many temples to honor him." [Krishnamurthy 29; Vol. 3]). There are also innumerable references within the text to local legends as well as tales from the Hindu mythological canon. The Cholas' patronage of Buddhist monasteries is celebrated by Kalki:

Later after many years when Arulmozhivarmar (Raja Raja Cholan) was crowned the king, he would bestow the entire village of Annaimangalam as a tax-free gift to the Choodamani Viharam (a Buddhist monastery) and would inscribe this royal decree as a copper plaque for posterity. Today, these edicts can be seen at Leiden Museum in Holland and therefore they are also known as Leiden Plates. (Krishnamurthy 97; Vol. 5)

However, he seems to regard Islamic influence in the north of India as invasive and corrosive. The 'secularism' of the Cholas within the novels, probably reflecting that of Kalki himself, seems to be circumscribed by a diluted form of religious nationalism.

Kalki's historical research was rigorous despite the obvious sensationalist literary interventions that include doppelgangers, mistaken identity, and disguise. He also at times makes references to famous contemporary figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Joseph Stalin; and Akhila Ramnarayan in her reading of his *Sivagamiyin Sapatam* has pointed out the presentism within the narrative of the text. Kalki's historical novels addressed concerns of his 'present' such as factionalism (within the context of the times during which *Ponniyin Selvan* is set, it is the rivalry between the Vaishnavite and Saivite factions of Hindu religious worship), feudalism and rural to urban migration.⁵ His stories

also include the popular tragic component of the failed romance and the quest-based tropes of journey and companionship. In the second part of the *Ponniyin Selvan* series there is a rather abrupt shift from the urban landscape to a coastal ‘paradise’ and the character of the boatwoman Poonkuzhali comes to represent a sort of natural innocence in contrast to the corruption of those in the cities. (Vandiya Devan, upon meeting her, thinks to himself, “Women like her who live close to nature are more beautiful than those who live closeted away from it,” [Krishnamurthy 52; Vol. 2]). These elements of the plot can be seen to reflect the anxieties surrounding the changing nature of family, employment and values in post-independence Tamil Nadu. The dying king Sundara Chola comes to represent the traumatic end of a troubled reign that would eventually give way to the ‘Golden Age’ of medieval Tamil Nadu. Given the uncertainties of his era, Kalki’s writings appear to be immersed in themes of revival and regeneration in the face of the political upheavals of his era. There are also mythological and philosophical references to the impermanence of empires and dynasties:

Have we ever heard of any one dynasty ruling endlessly, beyond all bounds of time? Never! Even the illustrious Ishvaku clan, which boasted Lord Rama, died out. The Rettai Mandalathar rose to bring the Chalukya reign to an end. Empires and dynasties do have a habit of rising to tremendous greatness, and crashing to hollow depths; entirely natural, don’t you think? There are kingdoms that have ruled for centuries, and disappeared without a trace. (Krishnamurthy 94; Vol. 4)

The entirety of the fifth part of the series has various allusions to the progressive measures taken by the Cholas in the sectors of healthcare, urban planning, water management and flood control, among other things. The history of the achievements of the Chola kings on the battlefield and their ‘benevolent’ conquests of other parts of the Indian Subcontinent are celebrated through songs and poems rendered by the characters within the novel as well through descriptions by the third-person narrator. However, given Kalki’s adherence to Gandhian principles, certain expository passages within the novels do address the moral dilemma of warfare and criticize Prince Aditya Karikalan’s construction of a ‘Golden Palace’ as a sort of vanity project. Kalki also at times addresses the trappings of a monarchical system and describes the forms of corruption that can proliferate among the wealthy and the elite. Nevertheless, he does seem to offer a blueprint for a fairer form of governance through the opinions of his more just and well-meaning characters. The philanthropic mother of Prince Madhuranthakan, Sembian Madevi warns her son against laying claim to the throne against the wishes of his deceased father, the reluctant king Gandaradithar who “hated politics, schemes, and intrigues.” She further recalls her husband posing the following question, “A common thief steals gold from other people and in the same manner the King tries to covet lands from other Kingdoms. What’s the difference between the King and the thief?” (Krishnamurthy 174; Vol. 4)

According to Sumathi Ramaswamy, the nostalgia for ancient Sangam poems that was so endemic in devotional circles was in Tamil Nadu, at the turn of the twentieth century, can be attributed to “the attrition and disappearance of royal courts and religious centers of learning, the redirection of funds towards “useful” and “modern” forms of knowledge, the rise of new bourgeois forms of consumption, and a colonial state indifferent to the promotion of India’s languages and literatures”—all these contributed “to the generalised feeling that things were no longer as they were in the past.” (“Passions” 220) This generalised feeling of change and resistance to it was especially manifest in the reaction to the transformations in traditional gender roles and the problematization of caste hierarchy.

Representation of Gender and Caste

A crucial aspect of this negotiation of the past in relation to the present was the ‘woman question’—the construction of the ideal Indian woman. Despite the political participation of women in the Independence movement and Periyar’s anti-caste activism, there was a lack of gender perspective and the absence of women (beyond the tokenistic) within the public political sphere in post-Independence Tamil Nadu. Kalki was incidentally known for creating feisty, outspoken women charac-

ters and those in *Ponniyin Selvan* seem to arguably enjoy more autonomy as a whole than the women of Kalki's own time probably did.

However, Kalki's women rarely transgress the limits of bourgeois morality and frequently fall into gendered dichotomies of 'virtuous' and 'immoral'. The rather conservative nationalist construction of women co-existed with reformist impulses in the time of high nationalism. Simultaneously, the Indian and Tamil woman in popular imagination had contradictory qualities of bravery and timidity, eloquence and reticence, boldness and reserve, while never questioning her patriarchal positioning. The feud between Nandhini, the mysteriously beautiful young wife of the aged chief military advisor of the king and Kundavai, the intelligent and tactical princess, represents the power struggles of women within distinguished households that impact political outcomes, despite being patronizingly dismissed as 'women's squabbles.'

Though Kalki made more effort than other contemporaries towards a more nuanced portrayal, the women who are covertly praised within the narrative are those who uphold *karpū*, or what can be loosely translated as a 'Tamil woman's chastity'. The emphasis on women's chastity has always interestingly co-existed within the 'progressive' politics of Tamil nationalist movements despite occasionally being contested by rationalists like Periyar. Earlier iterations of the Dravidian Movement, from the 1920s to the 1940s, were primarily represented by the South Indian Liberal Federation (commonly referred to as the Justice Party, after the party's mouthpiece journal called *Justice*) and the Self-Respect Movement. Both had Periyar's leadership along with a large group of vibrant thinkers, writers and orators—many of whom were women. These political groups soon became overshadowed by the growth of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Dravidian Progress Federation) or the DMK, from the 1940s onwards. The dawn of the DMK coincided with the dwindling participation of women in public politics and a dilution of radical critique of casteism. This is not to suggest that Kalki's portrayal deliberately coincided with the changing position of women or Dalits in the Dravidian movement as Kalki himself was not in accordance with many of its goals. Rather, this is indicative of the way in which writers or movements that have a progressive veneer often curb the radical potential of women or women characters whose realities are relegated to the fringes of a revolution. The literary figures from classical texts celebrated by the Dravidian movement are evidence of this trend. For instance, the virtuous wife Kannagi from the epic *Cilappathikaram*⁶ is often invoked as a cultural marker of chaste Tamil womanhood and sometimes to signify the destructive potential of a righteous woman's rage. Periyar considered her a regressive cultural icon and condemned the veneration of Kannagi as sexist and casteist (given that only Brahmins are spared her wrath). However, the Dravidian movement continues to uphold Kannagi as a key representative of Tamil womanhood.

The models of masculinity represented in the *Ponniyin Selvan* novels correspond to the patterns adopted by Bengali writers such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee who were eager to create more traditionally macho men in their fiction, in response to the stereotype of the 'effete' Bengali Babu of the colonialist construction (sometimes also reflected in the characterization of male protagonists in the works of writers like Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay); and thereby set their stories in the medieval past of warrior heroes and kings. (Mukherjee, "Early Novels" xv)

The emergence of the novel in India coincided with a new and unprecedented interest in history and historiography in the nineteenth century. Occasional convergences between the discourses of history and fiction can be seen in the past-based novels poised between two opposing teleologies of history—one that glorified the past as the lost golden age and the other influenced by Enlightenment rationalism that put its faith in 'progress', envisaging a future when society might achieve a higher level of equality or justice (xvii). Bengali writers who are often studied as representative novelists of this period strove to reconcile the requisites of 'progressive' enlightened masculinity with the counter-requisite of the valorous sword-fighting hero. In the Tamil milieu, Kalki's attempt at reconciling these seemingly disparate characteristics produces characters such as Vandiya Devan and

Arulmozhivarman who are willing to accept the counsel of older women, revere more powerful women and advocate for peaceful means of conflict-resolution. But they also rescue damsels-in-distress, lead armies and at times banter in a casually misogynist way about the 'wives of women'. War seems to be romanticized when it is 'good' men like Arulmozhivarman leading the charge.

My blood and flesh remind me every day that I belong to the dynasty from which Emperor Sibi and Manu Needhi Cholan were born. They remind me to forsake wealth and comfort and help people. I also have ancestors like Vijayalaya Chola and Karikala Vallavan who ask me to pick up my sword, gather my army, go on conquests, and find glory in war and expanding the empire. (Krishnamurthy 33; Vol. 3)

The treatment of caste within the novel is similarly establishmentarian rather than subversive. While Kalki embraced the Gandhian rhetoric of anti-casteism and condemned this form of discrimination in his novels of social realism, his popular works of historical fiction rarely questioned hierarchy and rather naturalized it. The dialogues of the upper-caste characters often include casteist slurs which while arguably realistic, are not subverted or problematized anywhere within the framework of the novels. Similar to the trope of the valiant Rajput warrior in the fiction of the Bengali and other contemporary North Indian historical novelists, the valor of Kalki's heroes is tied to the 'superior' caste or clan that they were born into. Vandiya Devan, in particular, is constantly exalted as Vanarkulathu Veeran which translates to 'Warrior of the Vanar clan', with his prowess attributed the caste he was born into. As he proclaims to the soldiers who try to stop him entering a fortress: "You dare to ask 'me' who I am? I am Vallavareyan, Vandiya Devan of the Vanar Clan in Thiruvallam. Once upon a time, soldiers like you, proudly carved the names of my ancestors on their chests." (Krishnamurthy 35; Vol.1) This superficial approach to caste parallels the limitations of Dravidian promises for Tamil self-affirmation and its oftentimes shallow critique of caste hegemony.

Modernity, Nostalgia and Historical Fiction

Svetlana Boym's examination of nostalgia in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* characterizes it as not merely an individual sickness but a symptom of an age, a historical emotion which is not necessarily opposed to modernity and individual responsibility, and is rather coeval with it. She observes that outbreaks of nostalgia often follow revolutions, as revolutions were accompanied by political and cultural manifestations of longing. Boym believes that "the object of romantic nostalgia must be beyond the present space of experience, somewhere in the twilight of the past or on the island of utopia where time has happily stopped, as on an antique clock." (Boym 25) This contradictory modernist impulse can be examined in the context of the delineation of statehood and linguistic identity in Tamil Nadu that led to revivals of traditional literary forms set in a near-mythical past. With the typical dramatic license available to a popular historical novelist Kalki enlarges upon the myth of an already legendary ruler, perhaps most famous for his religious patronage. Though Arulmozhivarman is a king in the not-so-distant past with a well-documented reign, Kalki in his telling elevates him to the status of King Arthur of the English legends. *Ponniyin Selvan* continues to have historical and symbolic resonance because of its association with the royal exploits of Tamil kings and with the literary achievements of the poets whom they patronized.

Nostalgia could be a framework to explain the unprecedented interest in the 2022 adaptation of *Ponniyin Selvan* created among the Tamil audience, particularly among those of the older generation, who would have either read the text during its initial run or in its subsequent editions. The two-part film adaptation of the series revived discussions of Tamil heritage and pride in popular media that the books had originally generated over seventy years ago. Tamil devotees have often idealized kingship in their historical ruminations, even as they demand modern democratic forms of rule in the political realm. There has not been much popular interrogation of this preoccupation with a monarchical past or the contribution of the text to the overall project of Tamil devotion in Kalki's

own time. In fact, Kalki faced much more criticism and derision from his contemporaries than he does in the present. A powerful sense of Tamil pride and autonomy continues to be the dominant feature of the political culture of the Tamil region to this day and this sensibility is “kept alive by the circulation of memories about a place and a time when Tamils had been in power and when Tamil speakers had been ruled by their own.” (Ramaswamy, “Fabulous Geographies” 130)

A number of early novels in the immediate pre-independence and post-independence years depicted contemporary conditions in what seemed like a realistic mode, reflecting current concerns and speculating on possible resolutions—a prime example of this trend is the works of the Tamil modernist writer Pudumaipittan who was a harsh critic of what he perceived to be Kalki's ‘unrealistic’ writing. But an equal number or more novels were set either in the historical past or in a remote unspecified era of romance. Kalki somehow straddled both these modes of writing; in his sentimental novels of ‘social realism’ he interrogated nationalism and social inequality, and his historical novels in their description of past glory also indirectly addressed the broader issues concerning post-independence Tamil political identity. *Ponniyin Selvan*, written at a time of seismic changes in modern Tamil Nadu, is a collective text that at close reading is revealed to contain cultural anxieties, ambivalence towards modernity and the revivalist spirit that characterized immediate pre- and post-independence Tamil Nadu, in a populist narrative format. Kalki's compensatory approach to antiquity and cultural memory is indicative of the author's own political convictions and what was possibly the populist bourgeoisie zeitgeist as well. The role of the historical novel that is widely circulated within a given magazine culture as a repository of mainstream images of the past and the present is reinforced by the iconic status accorded to some of these novels, be they critically acclaimed or not. Kalki's series of historical novels, particularly *Ponniyin Selvan*, ensured that historical fiction became the genre through which post-independence anxieties about language, tradition and regional identity were addressed within popular Tamil print culture.

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Notes

¹ For a detailed account of the history of modern Tamil publishing, see A.R.Venkatachalapathy, *The Province of the Book: Scholars, Scribblers and Scribes in Colonial Tamilnadu* (2012).

² Sangam literature, historically known as ‘the poetry of the noble ones’ connotes ancient Tamil literature and is the earliest known literature of South India. The Tamil tradition and legends link it to three literary gatherings around Madurai and Kapâm⁴apuram (Pandyan capitals): the first over 4,440 years, the second over 3,700 years, and the third over 1,850 years before the start of the common era. Scholars consider this Tamil tradition-based chronology as ahistorical and mythical. Most scholars suggest the historical Sangam literature era spanned from c. 300 BCE to 300 CE, while others variously place this early classical Tamil literature period a bit later and more narrowly but all before 300 CE.

³ C.Rajagopalachari (10 December 1878 – 25 December 1972), popularly known as Rajaji, was an Indian statesman, writer, lawyer, and independence activist from Tamil Nadu. Rajagopalachari was the last Governor-General of India, as India became a republic in 1950. He also served as leader of the Indian National Congress, Premier of the Madras Presidency, Governor of West Bengal, Minister for Home Affairs of the Indian Union and Chief Minister of Madras State.

⁴ The egalitarian communal life depicted in Sangam literature, seen to be untainted by a Brahminical religion, and a culture based on sedentary life fed into Dravidian identity politics and provided an alternative worldview to that of a Vedic age constructed by the Orientalists.

- ⁵ This is exemplified by the scores of people in the novels who move from villages to the cities of Tanjore and Pazhayarai to set up shops and other aspirational ventures. Kalki also pays tribute to the now lost cultural capital of Pazhayarai, once an important city of the Chola empire, partly due to migration to Tanjore. Kalki quotes from poets, who lived much after the reign of Sundara Chola and his progeny, to lament this loss.
- ⁶ *Cilappatikāram* (“the Tale of an Anklet”) is the earliest Tamil epic. It is a tragic love story of an ordinary couple, Kannaki and her husband Kovalan. *Cilappatikāram* has roots in the Tamil bardic tradition, as Kannaki and other characters of the story are mentioned or alluded to in Sangam literature such as the *Narriṇai* and later texts such as the *Kovalam Katai*. It is attributed to a prince-turned-monk Iḷaṅkō Aṭṭiḷ, and was probably composed in the 5th or 6th century CE.

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