

## **THE REIGN OF REGIONS AND THE PLIGHT OF THE MARGINALISED: POWER, PRIVILEGE, PEOPLE AND PAST IN KALKI'S PONNIYIN SELVAN**

**Ms Smrithy Sudarsanan V**

SRF, Research Department of English, MES Asmabi College, P Vemballur,  
Kodungallur, Affiliated to University of Calicut

**Dr Amitha P Mani**

Assistant Professor of English, MES Asmabi College, P Vemballur, Kodungallur

### **Abstract**

Privileges play a dual role, at times it divides us apart and at times it unifies us, often bifurcating each other with the terms the privileged and the marginalized. More often than not, the discrimination that the people deprived of privileges faces, urges us to look deeper into how privilege works. The novel Ponniyin Selvan, revamped as the Pan-Indian movie, which was released in two parts in 2022 and 2023 respectively, hides a lot of unsaid stories about these privileges. The paper aims to envisage three different kinds of privileges enjoyed by the characters of the novel, Geopolitical Privilege, Privilege by birth and **Privilege of gender. It also delves into the other side of the privileged section- the marginalized, to explore how these seemingly innocent privileges ruin the life of the marginalized, ignoring their very existence and shattering their hopes.**

The novel Ponniyin Selvan by Kalki Krishnamurthy has great semblance to the river Ponni, aka Kaveri, one of the novel's pivotal characters. The trajectory of the novel often follows the course of the river, arid at some places, abundant and overflowing with unpredictable turns and breathtaking unforeseeable currents in some areas, and at times, the smooth flow allows a mesmerising ride to rejoice in the topography and the people at its shores. Ponniyin Selvan, the Tamil Historical Fiction, embraced the readers as an episodic novel in the Tamil magazine Kalki from 29th October 1950 to 16th May 1954 and was compiled into five volumes in 1955. The single novel led to the immense popularity of the magazine and the rocketing of the magazine's circulation. Any work under the genre of Historical Fiction follows a contradicting dichotomy within itself; the former term represents the factual and, later, the imaginative side of the genre. There have been claims that the most endeared characters, like Poonkuzhali, Nandini, and Alvarkadiyan Nambi, were the product of Kalki's imagination. However, the paper is not a factual investigation of Kalki's story and hence takes most of the author's claims for granted. In his celebrated work, Ode on a Grecian Urn, Keats has praised the timelessness and permanence of any creative work of art by exemplifying the Urn. Ponniyin Selvan, 73 years since its publication, has transcended the everchanging tastes and literary textures and still inspires many, simultaneously mirroring the local colour, imparting the culture, history, beliefs, strife for power, privileges, love, bereavement and livelihood of the people of a long-lost era. The merit that metamorphoses any work of art into a classic is its acceptance and relevance, even years after its production.

The paper traverses the idea of privilege in the two-volume Novel *Ponniyin Selvan* by considering the diverse branches of privileges that find their place in the novel. More often than not, privilege comes alongside power, often as a complementary gift. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines privilege as a 'right or immunity granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage or a favour'. The way privileges work can often be unfair, wounding and frustrating the ones at the periphery and making them hopeless. "What makes anything a privilege is a particular characteristic of the circumstances in which it occurs (1)." Thus, setting a well-defined boundary to the nature of privileges and those who reap its benefits can be tiresome. "There can be a privileged few, but not a privileged many.<sup>1</sup> Scrutinizing *Ponniyin Selvan* for privileges was not a herculean task as the author has been into the divine right of kingship, thus naturally endowing the Royals with the ultimate spectrum of privileges. Set in the backdrop of the power struggle for the throne between the Chera, Chola, Pandya and Pallava Dynasties, the novel is predominantly about the power struggles and the fight for privileges. Thus, the paper focuses on three types of privileges and the marginalised and favoured groups that result from these four categories.

Gearóid Ó Tuathail states, "Geography is about power" (2). The war for the territories and the quest for its control is all about seizing the same power. The royal family that wins the constant, continuous, vengeful war would rule the fertile Kaveri basin and the territories alongside, thus endowing them with immense privilege over the fertile Kaveri Delta region. With the onset of heated discussions on spatial theory and geopolitics, the advantages and disadvantages of geographical peculiarities of an area began to be profusely dealt with within the academic sphere. Geographical privilege was not popular until recent times, though the concept was pervasive in geography textbooks. The hunter-gatherers settling on riverbeds and the clash of the different clans for dominance over fertile river basins and seaports were all part of the quest for geographical privilege. These quests will have bloody repercussions for the area's existing social groups/ inhabitants. Gearóid Ó Tuathail highlights in his book *Critical Geopolitics* that resistance is an important aspect of power (10). The silent retaliation of the Pandyas against the Cholas, under the leadership of Nandini, and the passive resistance of Mahindan, the King of Elam, are all part of this resistance.

Primarily, the geopower struggles revolve around a centre point. Space was homogenised (Euclidianized) and measured from a central point, which was normally the seat of government or royal authority (Tuathail 9). The homogenisation of the territories under the Chola rule undoubtedly demanded a midpoint of power. The fight for the central point sometimes destabilises the whole territory, which is visible throughout the text. Aditya Karikalan wanted the golden palace he built in Kanchipuram to be the midpoint and epitome of his growing empire. Inviting his father, the Chola Emperor Sundara Chola and his mother, Vanamadevi, to visit the golden extravagance and stay there ever after was part of the plan, though not conspicuous. On the other hand, the Emperor does not want to leave Tanjore, the capital of the Chola empire. The Pazhuvettarayar brothers aided the decision as Tanjore was the location of their feudal palaces, where they could exert their power without any outside interference. Arulmozhi, at the same time, was on a mission to homogenise Elam, aka Sri Lanka, and defeat the Sri Lankan King Mahindan. References to maritime trade and merchants from China and Arabia also find a place in the book. The changing nature of trade was mentioned in the contrast made between the benevolent Arabs who came for a trade earlier and

the attacking Arabs with a herd of horses with some sinister plan who visited Elam during the events of the book. Thus, marking and seizing of territories was not just confined to the royal clans. Historian Raghavan Srinivasan backed the evidence of the Chola quest in Sri Lanka.

When the Cholas were a vassal state, their overlords decided the relationship with Lanka. However, from the time they broke out of their feudatory status, they took a severe view of the alliance of the Lanka kings with the Pandyas and Cheras. When Rajaraja ascended the throne, the expansion of the empire and securing sea routes gained enormous politico-military significance, as never before. Lanka was an area that deserved meddling (46-47).

Empires grow at one time and diminish at another; Aditya Karikalan's discussion with Parthipan, the Pallava prince, was worthy of being noted. Narasimha Pallava, the Pallava Ruler and Rajaditya Karikalan, the Great-grandfather and namesake of Aditya Karikalan, spent considerable time and money on sculptures and cave paintings. "What have we done? Killed humans and made wars?" (Kalki 55) asks Aditya Karikalan. Even though there is no evidence to support that the ferocious Aditya Karikalan repented the bloodshed and wars he has done, it was highly philosophical when the permanence of art and the temporality of human life were discussed. The dynasty with power over the geographically potent region will always benefit from it through taxes, maritime trade, and agricultural surplus. Aditya Karikalan built his golden palace, which was seen as an extravagance by even the Samanthas. Arulmozhi Varman coaxed the emperor to send weaponry and food during his stay at Elam, which added to the displeasure of the royal court members. Despite all the vexations, both the princes succeeded in their aims mainly due to the financial state they enjoyed from their geographical privilege. On the other hand, the marginalised ones are the Samantha kings, who suffer from paying extra taxes to the Pazhuvettarayar to finance the extravaganza of the young princes. Nevertheless, it mentions the plight of the citizens in constant turmoil.

There is no denying the fact that birth is a prerogative that determines the pleasure one enjoys or the marginalisation one suffers, a scenario that was not significantly different during the Sangam Period as well. Even after being the Chola Queen, Poonkuzhali was addressed as Odakkari by many characters, an affirmation of their unwillingness to accept her new position that conflicts with their mental comparison of her old status. Poonkuzhali is the most self-willed among the women of Ponninyin Selvan, stubborn as her father Tyagavidangar denotes. She is free to wander and explore according to her will, a choice denied even to the most privileged ladies in Ponninyin Selvan nevertheless, in the present century. She has saved the life of Arulmozhi Varman more than once with her wit, courage and expertise. Kalki has made a clear point about Arulmozhi Varman's feelings towards her, which were not less than hers. Their crush towards each other was nipped in the bud because of Poonkuzhali's lack of royal heritage, which is the fate shared by her aunt Mandakini and cousin Nandini. Kundavai objected to Aditya Karikalan's infatuation towards Nandini as the latter is an orphan, a woman whose clan, caste or parents are unknown, partly fueled by her jealousy towards Nandini's beauty. The Sundara Chola conveniently forgot Mandakini as he knew the repercussions of marrying a non-royal woman. Both the father and the son regretted on their lack of courage and abandonment of their love in the later stages of their life. Mandakini was the most marginalised one; her non-royal caste identity, gender and deafness subjected her to triple oppression.

When Chendan Amudan, the cousin of Poonkuzhali, asks her hand for marriage, she denies it and makes it clear that she would either marry a King or die a virgin. This may initially seem petulant on her part, but if Vanathi can wish to marry Arulmozhi just because she was born into a royal family, then what makes Poonkuzhali pertinent or ambitious is just her social status or the reader's conditioning towards it. Later, Poonkuzhali changes her mind and decides to marry Chendan Amudan after witnessing the death of Mandakini and the silent suffering and lack of freedom of the royal women. Though not conspicuous about his existence in natural history, he was born as the stillborn son of Sembiyan Mahadevi and Emperor Gandharaditya Chola; Chendan Amudan made his first cry hours after his birth. His birth mother, who had exchanged Mandakini's son as her own, believing that her son was dead, came to know about the existence of Amudan five years after his birth. Thus, being born into a privileged family is not the only determining factor for acquiring the luxuries of life. Amudan had the Cinderella moment of being acknowledged and throned as the emperor in the later stages of his life. Neither Nandini nor her twin brother Madhuranthakan had such a privilege, though Sembiyan Mahadevi exchanged the latter for her stillborn son. While Nandini's birth went unnoticed by others, in harsh and hostile situations to a mentally unstable mother who abandoned her after birth, Aditya Karikalan's birth was a royal festival. Malayamman, Aditya Karikalan's grandfather, recalls the festivities after his birth and proclaims that Chola Nadu has never seen such a grandeur before and after.

Gendered privileges have been topics of discussion since the advent of feminist studies. The women characters in Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan* are much ahead of their time. The Chola royal women had enough financial independence. Raghavan Srinivasan has described the financial freedom enjoyed by Kunthavai,

Rajaraja's elder sister, Kundavai, also played an appreciably significant role in the empire's temporal and spiritual matters, significant in those times. Her endowment of 10,000 *kazhanjus* of gold to the Thanjavur temple is legendary<sup>3</sup>. She had her own palace in Pazhayarai<sup>4</sup> and had enough income to enter into land transactions. (Srinivasan 97)

Throughout the novel, Kalki praised Kundavai's contribution to the public welfare and hospitals. She was elder than Arulmozhi Varman but chose not to get married as she never wanted to leave Cholanadu. In one instance, she says that she could even deny the throne of heaven for being in Cholanadu. She was proficient in royal strategies and even guided her father and brothers in the governance. Her grandfather, Malayamman, regretfully sighs that if Kunthavai was a boy, the world would have been under the Chola empire (Kalki 103). Despite all these acclaims, she spoke the most misogynist words of the novel. She chides her court ladies for laughing loudly in front of Vallavarayan Vanthiyathevan, soliloquising what he would have thought of the Chola women. Despite devising a foolproof masterplan to bring Arulmozhi Varman back to Tanjore, she apologises for her interferences in the royal court with the onset of a minor setback and says that she has proven that women should not have a say in royal matters.

Manimekhalai, the sister of Kanthanmaran, was portrayed as an epitome of innocence and goodwill. Princesses were often the pawns of their fathers in the process of matchmaking and kingdom expansion. Manimekhalai was given the hope of marrying Vanthiyathevan, but later, her father and brother chose Adithya Karikalan as her future husband. After Adithya

Karikalan's murder, they wanted her to marry Madhurantaka, whom she dramatically detests. She was even willing to admit that she had murdered Adithya Karikalan to save Vanthiyathevan. Her suffering, untimely death, and overloaded innocence were aimed at the creation of a sympathetic character in her. Vanathi, on the other hand, was similar to the Victorian heroines, who fainted at the sight of their love or during crises. She was made modest and beautiful, and Kalki often stressed her higher rank, giving an intuition that she would be the one whom Arulmozhi married. Manimekhalai confides to Nandini that marrying a girl is better than marrying Madhurantaka, who has travelled in a women's palanquin. The concept of gender and gender roles in a patriarchal society is evident through the mentality of different characters towards Madhurantaka. The prince, who has no martial arts training, has not participated in any wars and has travelled in Nandini's palanquin to reach the secret meeting, was often treated as a lesser man or equal to a woman. The characterisation of Madhurantaka was in such a way that the citizens hated him for what he was despite not showing any evil will in the beginning.

Ponniyin Selvan posits unconditional love and devotion towards the king and the dynasty, particularly toward Arulmozhi Varman. The Chola kingdom was one of India's most expansive empires, and managing such a vast empire required considerable will, effort, and coordination. They have effectively managed to curb the conspiracies of the Pandyas and Mahindan, the king of Elam. The geopolitical advantages of the Ponni River basin, seaports and the overpowering of Elam proved effective in the empire's trade and financial and executive stability. The royals had the divine right to rule by birth, though there were internal conflicts within the family about seizing the throne. Chendan Amudan was the proof that privileged birth may not be the final determining factor for the luxuries one enjoys. Madhuranthakan and Nandini, the children of Veera Pandya, were never acknowledged by their father. Despite not having a royal lineage, Poonkuzhali became the queen of Chendan Amudan, but was often addressed as Odakkari by the other characters to denote her profession. Thus, transcending caste and class is a herculean task in a conditioned society. Gender and its privileges have been a topic of active discussion for a long. The royal women of the Chola family were financially independent and often had a fair share in the donations to temples and hospitals. However, unlike Kunthavai, whose opinions were valued, most women in Ponniyin Selvan could not make their own decisions. The fate of Manimekhalai, Nandini and her mother, Mandakini, proves the same. More often than not one's privilege can be at the expense of the other one's basic rights.

### **Works Cited**

- Privilege, Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/privilege> .  
Accessed on 1 August 2023.
- Banerjee, Supurna and Ghosh, Nandini, editors. *Caste and Gender in Contemporary India Power, Privilege And Politics*. Routledge, 2019, New York.
- Kalki, Ponniyin Selvan Part one. translated by Subrahmaniyan. G., DC Books, 2022, Kerala.
- Kalki, Ponniyin Selvan Part two. translated by Subrahmaniyan. G., DC Books, 2022, Kerala.
- Keats, John, *The poems of John Keats*. Rupa classics, 2000, New Delhi.
- Srinivasan, Raghavan, *Rajaraja Chola Interplay Between an Imperial Regime and Productive Forces of Society*. Leadstart Inkstate, 2021, India.

Tuathail, Gearóid Ó, *Critical Geopolitics the Politics of Writing Global Space*. Routledge, 1996, London.

White, Alan R., "Privilege". Vol. 41, No. 3 (May, 1978), pp. 299-311. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1094815> . Accessed 1 August 2023.