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KALKI'S PONNIYIN SELVAN: A CELEBRATORY MANIFESTATION OF THE SCENIC SUBLIME

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Abstract: India, especially South is famous for its rich art, culture, tradition and luscious nature. Kalki Krishnamurthy's Tamil novels record and bring out a fine blend of all these. His Ponniyin Selvan is a historical tale that springs from his soul, who grows on the banks of river Ponni and flows straight into the hearts of the readers. With its beautiful and rich descriptions of the river Ponni, this paper presents the novel as a celebratory manifestation of the river Ponni which comes under the scenic sublime category of Peter Barry.

Index Terms : celebratory, Kaveri, nature, scenic sublime.

Barry Commoner's first law of ecology outlined in the first chapter of 'the closing circle' reflects the universality: "Everything is connected to everything else" [Commoner 16]. All human and non-human lives are embedded in nature and they find pleasure or solace in Nature. Many writers like Wordsworth, Shakespeare and Thoreau considered nature as a preacher for humanity and wanted to be one with nature and no doubt nature has been fascinating writers for many centuries. Nature writing is done in two tones – 'celebratory' as in American variant and in British variant tended to be more 'minatory', that is it warns of environmental threats from various sources. [Barry 251]

Peter Barry in his *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, divides the landscape into four areas: the wilderness, the scenic sublime, the countryside and the domestic picturesque. Peter Barry's examples for Area two or the scenic sublime are "forests, lakes, mountains, cliffs, waterfalls" [Barry 255]. Rivers, that come under the scenic sublime are the source of all inspirations for mankind in general and the favoured muse of writers in particular just as river Ponni was, to the legendary historical fiction writer Kalki R.Krishnamurthy. Kalki, the first significant historical novelist in Tamil, through his writings has fascinated not only the Tamil people but people all over highlighting the delicate relationship between man and nature. His *Ponniyin Selvan* was written in Tamil in five parts and was later translated into English. *Ponniyin Selvan* is not just a glorification of the Chozhas but also river Ponni which served as the lifeblood of the ancient Kingdoms and modern cities of South India.

Popularly known as Daksina Ganga (Ganges of the South), Ponni or the river Kaveri is sacred to the people of South India and is worshipped as a Goddess. With all its serenity and sanctity, the Kaveri is celebrated in Tamil Literature and is held in great reverence. Kaveri never fails to shower her bounty on both the states through which it flows and its entire course is considered holyground.

To Kalki, Kaveri is, at one moment a calm and composed Goddess flowing peacefully, at another a raging, rampaging demon; at one moment a caring and nourishing mother and then an avenging spirit breaching her banks

and destroying everything. Needless to say, the five volumes of *Ponniyin Selvan* trace the changing fortunes of the Chozha Empire in the backdrop of the holy and raging Kaveri. This paper attempts to explore the ‘celebratory’ manifestation of the river Ponni in Kalki’s *Ponniyin Selvan* in all its grace and grandeur.

The introductory line of Kalki “invites the readers to take our places in the boat of imagination and go for a little while along the river of Time” [Part I 1]. The novel begins in a ‘celebratory’ note of the Kaveri in the Chozha land in full bloom:

All the rivers in the Chozha country were full on the eighteenth day of Adi. The lakes fed by these rivers would brim and overflow with little wavelets dancing over them. The river Kollidam, known by devotees as the Vada Kaveri, gushing out through its branch, the Vadavaru, had filled Veeranam completely, so that it looked like a seething sea. Through its seventyfour canals, the water from the lake irrigated a large area.[Part I 1]

Ecological wealth of flora and fauna enrich the novel from an eco-centric perspective. The author makes us travel along Vandiyathevan who is surprisingly astonished at the very sight of Veeranam lake which is picturesquely described:

Vandiyathevan reached the southern corner of the lake. He saw the Vadavaru branch of the Kollidam flowing into the lake. From a short distance from the embankment the lake was dry. Karuvelu and woodapple trees had been planted on the embankment to strengthen it and prevent it from being damaged by floods. Hemp grew densely near the river. The fresh flood waters of the Vadavaru flowing from the southwest and the trees lining its banks, together with the Veeranam Lake itself, was like a beautiful painting. [Part I 2]

On the banks of the Veeranam lake in the carnivalesque atmosphere, we could not stop “listening to the girls singing their melodious songs about the boats, the abundance of water and the valour and glory of the Chozha dynasty”. [Part I 3]

*See, my maidens
The Vadavaru
See, my friends
These white waters
Sweep by us, a-rushing
See my beauties,
Our Kaveri
Come to us a-swirling* [Part I 3]

Vandiyathevan’s joys knows no boundaries with his mind dancing to the tune of the girls’ “flood song” and to the tune of the river and the author’s descriptions about Kaveri reaches highest raising the readers’ expectations too:

As he approached the Chozha country, he saw that a joyful exuberance pervaded it. How fertile, how abundant would the countryside be beyond the Kollidam? What would the men and women there be like? The rivers! The ponds! How many crystal clear rivulets there would be! How Ponni river would look! Praised in poetry and epic! How pleasant the sight of all the flowering trees on its banks, the punnai, the konnai and the kadambam, would be! The Kuvalai flowers beckoning seductively from the river, the kumudam flowers and the red lotuses, what a lovely sight they would be! The beautifully sculpted temples built by the Chozha devotees on the banks of the Kaveri would be wonderful to look at! [Part I 7]

Kalki sketches a personified description by means of an extended metaphor in a highly lyrical mode, of the Ponni as a bride:

Born and brought up in Kudagu, the River Ponni, once she attains maturity, races over hills and through valleys, over rocks and hollows to join her husband, Samudrarajan. As she approaches Samudrarajan, the joy of knowing that she will soon see her husband makes her swell and expand. She goes a little

further, then spouts two arms. She rushes forward in leaps and bounds, her arms outstretched. Two loving arms are not enough to contain her ardour, so they become twenty, a hundred. Stretching out all her arms expectantly, she rushes to Samudrarajan. How well the foster mothers of the Chozha country adorn the bride who longs to reach her beloved husband! Adada! What a sight! The many green sarees they drape on her! How gorgeously they deck her with flowers! What beautiful fragrances they sprinkle on her! Aha! How can they be described, the punnai and kadambam trees on either side that shower their flowers so lovingly on her, like so many pearls and diamonds. How can one describe the sight? Even the flower - offerings made to the gods pale in comparison.

River Ponni! Which girl would not rejoice when she sees you? Can there be a woman whose heart does not swell when she looks at you in your bridal attire? [Part I 52]

If the Chozha age is perceived and presented as golden age it is mainly because of the fertile branches of the river Ponni. When the author describes Pazhayarai, the capital of the Chozha kings, no one could go away from the vision of the river Arisilar beautifully captured in his words:

The River Arisilar is one of the golden arms the Ponni stretches out to embrace her husband. This beautiful river is very near the Kaveri, to its south. It has to be pointed out to those who come from other places. A dense clump of trees hides the river well. It is said that the Arisilar can be compared to a royal princess who has never once left the anthappuram since she was born. This virgin river is incomparable in its beauty. [Part I 52]

To ensure the fact that Kaveri is praised and profusely described in the Tamil Sangam literature, Kalki quotes a beautiful Tamil song about Kaveri from *Silappadikaram* in his work sung by the girls:

*Covering yourself with a garment of beautiful flowers
Around which bees cluster and sing, you walked
With dark fish – eyes, open and rolling
flowed to the brim because unbent
Was your husband's perfect spear
So I've learnt. O Kaveri, may you live forever.
Your exciting garlands swung near you as you flowed
Peacocks danced and, following them
Koels sang in the groves bursting with flowers
O Kaveri, may you live forever ! ... [Part I 53]*

All these mark the fact that river Kaveri is a continuing motif throughout the novel. Not only does it enthrall all of us with its beauty but enshrines herself in history as a beloved Goddess when she saves, nurtures and raises the great Chozha Prince Arulmozhivarman into an Emperor. The title of the novel has a close connection to an incident that happens on the great river when Sundara Chozhar takes his family “to cruise on the river Ponni in their royal boat” [Part II 80]. When Arulmozhivarman, who is just five falls into the river when he tries to pluck Kadamba flowers on the river everyone is shocked and the search for the kid goes in vain. But a miracle happens when “a young woman stood in the middle of the river, holding the child aloft in both hands”. They all believe that it is the “Goddess Kaveri who had rescued Arulmozhi. Arrangements were made to perform a Puja to the river Ponni every year to mark the day. And from that day, the child, already dear to everybody in the palace, their “Selvan”, became “Ponniyin Selvan”, dear to the river Ponni” [Part II 80].

In all fairness, it must be said that Ponni is not all calm and collected Angel flowing from one volume to another and that there are quite a few instances which Kalki records to show her fury too. Once described as a beautiful, shy maiden, Ponni now seems to look like a rampaging Goddess when Periya Pazhuvettarayar sets out for Thanjavur and as he approaches the Kollidam opposite Thiruvaiyaru, he is caught in her fury:

The Kollidam had breached its bank and was flowing southward at great speed, tossing him along with it. Since he had slipped down a steep bank, he felt himself being pulled down deeper and deeper. When the boat capsized and he had fallen into the water, he had not despaired. He felt helpless now as he was

tossed up and down and dragged under the water. He could not hear or see. He could not stand up. He found it difficult to breathe. It was as if a cruel demon was pushing him down repeatedly, rolling him around and pulling him into the nether world. Aha! The demon was none other than the diabolic waters of the Kollidam which had overflowed its banks and was rushing at great speed through the breach it had made. Would it be possible to escape its cruel grasp, this frightful tossing and rolling? He could not feel the ground beneath him. He had nothing to hold on to. He was gasping for breath. [Part IV 46]

But at Durga Parameswari Devi's mercy, Periya Paluvettarayar is saved from Ponni's fury. Needless to say, nature which is of great help to increase the fertility of the Chozha country, at times "create alarming situations" [Part V 94] too. At another instance Vanathi and Poonkuzhali who are caught in Ponni's furious whirlpool, finally get rescued by Ponniyin Selvar who never gets scared or worried of river: Didn't the river Ponni care more for him than his own mother did? Wouldn't Mother Kaveri, who had saved him from drowning when he was a child, continue to protect him now? [Part V 103]. It is of no doubt that Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan* is a picture portrayal of Ponni in all its facades intent on nourishing her children at one moment; breaking her banks and destroying all livelihoods at another moment.

None the less, the author never fails to record his love for Ponni through Arulmozhivarman and Vanathi's conversation:

Prince! They say Mother Kaveri saved you once when you were a child. I know how deeply you love this river, the Ponni. But it's frightening to think of the misery it's brought the people and animals in the country. Sometimes I'm even tempted to call Mother Kaveri cruel.

Vanathi! Don't find fault with Mother Kaveri. She has such deep affection for our Chozha country. When that affection brims over, she breaks her banks and overflows. People who do not realise that blame her, the mother. [Part V 13]

The height of reverence for the river Kaveri is reached when Ponniyin Selvar comments on his love for the earth- maiden who flourishes on the banks of five rivers: Could there be any other place in this world as fertile and beautiful as this? What good fortune it is to be crowned Emperor of such a country! [Part V 244].

All these clearly depict that *Ponniyin Selvan* is a loving ode to the river Ponni with its elegance and splendor. The novel passes through the beauty of the forests, lakes and waterfalls as river Ponni. Peter Barry is quite clear that most of what is called 'nature writing' concerns the two middle ones – 'the scenic sublime' and 'the country side' [Barry 256] and no doubt that Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan* fixes itself to 'the scenic sublime' presenting the 'celebratory' aspects of nature.

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