



## INTERTEXTUALITY IN KALKI'S PONNIYIN SELVAN

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### Abstract:

Popularised by Julia Kristeva in her analysis of Bakhtin's Dialogic concept, 'Intertextuality' is a term that signifies the ways in which a literary text is connected to other texts, by means of its implicit or explicit allusions, citations, and transformations of the formal and substantive features of earlier texts. This research paper aims to analyse and explicate the intertextual touch found in Kalki Krishnamurthy's *Ponniyin Selvan*.

**Index Terms:** absorption, allusion, intertextuality, reference, transformation

The writer is a reader of text before s/he is a creator of texts, and therefore the work of art is inevitably shot through with references, quotations, and influences of every kind.

- Michael Worton and Judith Stills

As Worton and Stills argue in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, any text can be read and analyzed in terms of the other texts that the writer has absorbed and transformed to produce. This embracing of various forms of textual borrowing and echoing such as allusion, pastiche, calque, pastiche and quotation are referred to by the term "Intertextuality". A central idea of contemporary literary and cultural theory, intertextuality has its origins in the 20<sup>th</sup> century linguistics, particularly in the work of Swiss Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure [1857 – 1913]. But it was Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian French Philosopher and psychoanalyst, who coined the term and used at first in her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel" [1966]. Julia Kristeva popularized the notion of literary texts as exercises in intertextuality. Her structuralism emphasized the connections between texts and argued against the concept of a text as an isolated entity: "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" [Kristeva 66].

Intertextuality seems such a useful term because it foregrounds notions of relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence in modern cultural life. In *Intertextuality*, Allen Graham writes that the text is not an individual, isolated object but a compilation of cultural textuality. It refers to the allusions, references to other works, echoes, quotes, citations and even plagiarized sections of a work. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyze the elements of intertextuality in Kalki Krishnamurthy's *Ponniyin Selvan*. It is seen in the novel that the writer constantly goes back to the early Indian writings for references to highlight the excellence of the great Tamil writers. Kalki R.Krishnamurthy, the first significant historical novelist in Tamil, shows his great admiration and reverence for the classic Tamil Literature by borrowing, comparing and referring to, in his *Ponniyin Selvan*. The novel abounds in

intertextuality. Written by Kalki in five parts and translated by C.V.Karthik Narayanan, the novel garners critical acclaim for its vivid narration, picturesque description, tightly woven plot and its depiction of the power struggle and intrigues of the Chozha empire.

Kalki proudly enthralls the readers by presenting the story honoring the ancient Tamil writers by referring their songs, poetic lines and words of wisdom. No doubt that, *Ponniyin Selvan* is not a 'closed text' as it has connections between texts: "Works of literature, after all, are built from systems, codes and traditions established by previous works of literature" [Graham 1]. To mention a few, this paper focuses on the connections of three great Tamil writings in *Ponniyin Selvan*.— *Silappadikaram*, *Thirukkural* and *KambaRamayanam*.

Ancient Tamil literature is replete with references to Kaveri, the Ganges of the South. Ilango Adigal's *Silappadikaram*, the Tamil epic poem of 5,730 lines also sings the glory of river Kaveri. Kalki attempts to present an intertextual touch to *Ponniyin Selvan* by mentioning the following lines from *Silappadikaram* to bring his readers the exquisiteness of Kaveri:

*Covering yourself with a garment of beautiful flowers  
Around which bees cluster and sing, you walked  
With dark fish – eyes, open and rolling  
You 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!  
Your exciting garlands swung near you as you flowed  
To the brim, for you have seen  
The power of his fierce spear  
So I've learnt.  
O Kaveri, may you live forever. [Part I 53]*

As Intertextuality insists, texts are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures. *Ponniyin Selvan*'s frequent references to *Silappadikaram* highlight the text's interconnectedness and interdependence to the latter. References of Aychiar Kuravai songs from *Silappadikaram* focusses on the ancient Kuravai Koothu culture in Tamilnadu. With such comparisons, the readers could very easily get the ethos of ancient art:

*O friend! Mayavan pulled out the citrus tree  
In our broad uplands. At daytime if he came  
Among our herd of cows, won't we hear  
The sweet jasmine flute at his mouth? [Part I 261]*

More than just an entertainment, Koothu, where artists play songs with dance and play, educates the people about religion. Shortly after this, presenting another Aychiar Kuravai song from *Silappadikaram* that sings the glory of Lord Narayana, the novelist records his admiration for the classic Tamil epic:

*Eyes are not eyes that have not seen the dark Lord  
With red feet, eyes and lips;  
The great Lord, Mayavan, who appeared as a god  
And clasped the entire world in His navel  
With its flowering lotus. Eyes are not eyes  
Tongues are not tongues that haven't praised the Lord  
Who frustrated the wiles of foolish Kamsa;  
Who went as an envoy of the Pandavas to the hundred Kauravas  
To the sound of Vedic chants, praised in all four directions  
Tongues are not Tongues*

***That haven't uttered the name "Narayana".*** [Part I 265]

With unchanged amazement and awe, Kalki connects *Thirukkural*, the classic Tamil language text to his *Ponniyin Selvan*. The intertextuality of *Thirukkural* is obvious and plainly stated in the novel. No doubt that, the author's repetitive references to the couplets in his novel unfolds the readers, the aphoristic teachings on ethics and morality on various circumstances. When the novelist wants to explain one of his characters about fear and danger, he promptly quotes the Kural and explains:

***Foolish to meet fearful ills with fearless heart***

***Wisdom to fear where cause for fear exists***

Never fear an enemy who is face to face with you. One who is afraid is a coward.

[Part I 281]

It is certain that Thiruvalluvar's *Thirukkural* has been the moral mentor to everyone and needless to say Kalki's ubiquitous reference to it in his novel proves his esteemed appreciation for the Tamil Veda. What *Thirukkural* says about espionage is deliberately discussed in detail enlightening the enthusiastic readers:

***His officers, his friends, his enemies***

***All those who watch are trusty spies.***

Valluvar says a king must have spies to keep watch on those who work for him, on his relatives and his enemies.

***As monk or devotee, through every hindrance making way***

***A spy what'er men do, must watchful mind display.***

Valluvar says a spy must disguise himself as an ascetic, pretend to be dead and work tirelessly, no matter how much the enemy tortures him. He also says kings should set spies to keep an eye on other spies, so that he can find out their secrets:

***Spying by spies, the things they tell***

***To test by other spies is well.*** [Part III 215-216]

Not only does the novelist refer to the brilliant couplets but accolades the great writer too: How brilliant the writer must have been who could describe statecraft this way a thousand years ago! [Part III 216]. The epithet the novelist uses in *Ponniyin Selvan* to describe the poet and his work expresses his reverence to both. When it is needed to instruct on the qualities of a great ruler:

The great poet of Tamilnadu says:

***As the earth bears with men who delve into her breast***

***To bear with scornful men is of virtues the best.***

The earth is patient with those who dig it. And is that all? It also helps those who dig into it by giving them pure water. People who rule the earth must have this quality too. [Part III 276]

and again to caution about enemies:

The great Thiruvalluvar has said there could be a fatal weapon in the hands of a servile enemy, in the tears in his eyes and that an internal foe is more dangerous than an external one.

***Dread not the foes that as drawn swords appear***

***Friendship of foes, who seem as kinsmen fear.***

He has written that hidden enmity is worse than enmity declared, that one need not fear enemies with drawn swords, but one should be wary of enemies in the garb of friends. [Part IV 12]

the novelist right away refers to the Tamil Vedam of Poyyamozi Pulavar.

On another occasion, when the people of the Chozha country awaits Ponniyin Selvar's coronation, the novelist likens the joy of the Chozha people to the people of Ayodhya at the time of Sri Rama's coronation. Kalki's borrowing



from *Ramayanam*, a Tamil epic written by the Tamil poet Kambar during the 12<sup>th</sup> century describes the life of King Rama of Ayodhya. His reference to the great epic remarks the novel's intertextuality and the novelist's admiration which gets reflected in his words:

The story of Rama describes beautifully how all the citizens of Ayodhya were delighted when they heard that Dasaratha had decided to have Rama crowned.

All the older women of Ayodhya imagined they were Kosalai. Each one rejoiced, certain that her son was about to be crowned. All the young women, dressed in their finest clothes, were as happy as Seetha because each of them believed that her husband was about to be crowned. All the old men in Ayodhya felt like Dasaratha. Kambar has described the state of mind of the people of Ayodhya brilliantly:

***Chaste mothers rejoiced like Kosalai***

***Like Vasishtha the Brahmins: like Seetha the girls:***

***And she resembled the goddess Lakshmi***

***While all good men were Dasarathas.*** [Part V 287]

It is significant that these references from earlier works defend Kristeva's claim in her *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* [1980] that authors do not create their texts from their own mind, but rather compile them from pre-existent texts and in this view Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan* is no exception. It's allusions to the earlier works and its borrowings from the great writers allow the readers to open new perspectives and layers of meanings. Needless to say, the shaping of the text's meaning by another texts is apparent in Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan* since the writer intentionally invokes comparisons or associations between texts.

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