

FROM SCROLL TO SCREEN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PONNIYIN SELVAN AS NOVEL AND FILM

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Abstract

This paper explores the transformation of Ponniyin Selvan, the celebrated Tamil historical novel by Kalki Krishnamurthy, into Mani Ratnam's two-part film. The study investigates how the novel's rich psychological depth, linguistic brilliance, and narrative complexity are adapted for cinematic storytelling. Special attention is given to the depiction of Aditha Karikalan's death, a moment of profound ambiguity in the novel that is rendered with emotional clarity in the film. The analysis reflects on the challenges and liberties involved in adapting literature to screen, showing how each medium reshapes characters and themes according to its conventions. The paper argues that both versions offer distinct but equally powerful experiences, with the film emphasizing visual resolution where the novel preserves interpretive ambiguity. Ultimately, the transition from scroll to screen reveals both the continuity and transformation of a timeless narrative.

Keyword: Ponniyin Selvan, adaptation, Tamil cinema, historical fiction, Aditha Karikalan, narrative difference

Ponniyin Selvan occupies a singular place in Tamil literary culture. Serialized between 1950 and 1954 in the magazine *Kalki*, this monumental work by Kalki Krishnamurthy blends documented history with artistic imagination, capturing the splendor and intrigue of the Chola dynasty. For decades, its vivid characters, layered plot, and psychological depth have inspired generations of readers. The eventual adaptation of this novel into cinema, long considered an impossible feat, materialized under the direction of Mani Ratnam in the two-part film series released in 2022 and 2023. The

transition from page to screen entailed creative decisions that fundamentally reshaped the experience of the story. The narrative, themes, and character arcs inevitably underwent compression, re-interpretation, and visual reconfiguration. This paper examines the key differences between the novel and the films, emphasizing how each medium frames the same events and characters, especially the death of Aditha Karikalan, which becomes a central point of divergence.

The novel's style is a hallmark of its immersive quality. Kalki deploys an omniscient narrator who moves effortlessly across time, space, and consciousness. Readers experience the events from multiple vantage points, observing the ambitions and insecurities of Vandiyathevan, the intelligence and subtlety of Kundavai, the burning resentment of Nandhini, and the tragic nobility of Aditha Karikalan. The language itself is richly layered. Kalki's Tamil is at once lyrical and precise, blending courtly formality with colloquial idioms. This linguistic range imbues even minor episodes with historical and emotional depth. The cultural references, proverbs, and descriptive flourishes draw the reader into a meticulously reconstructed eleventh-century Tamilakam.

By contrast, the films must forgo much of this narrative omniscience. Mani Ratnam's adaptation relies on visual storytelling, music, and performance to suggest what prose can describe outright. The psychological states that Kalki unfurls over paragraphs are condensed into gestures, glances, and brief dialogues. This change is most apparent in the depiction of Aditha Karikalan's character. In the novel, he is presented as a brilliant warrior whose youthful impetuosity sets in motion the chain of events leading to his demise. The slaying of Veerapandiyan, the Pandya chieftain and Nandhini's lover, becomes a permanent stain on Karikalan's conscience. He is unable to forgive himself for the

violent act that destroyed a part of him, and he spirals into a tormented existence, divided between love and guilt.

In the novel, Kalki leaves Karikalan's death deliberately ambiguous. After being summoned to Kadambur Palace by Nandhini, the prince is later found dead. Though many characters and political factions have motives for his assassination, including the Pandya rebels and the supporters of Madhurantakan, the novel does not disclose the exact cause of death. Readers are left to speculate: was he killed by Nandhini in an act of revenge? Did he allow himself to be killed out of despair? Was he murdered by conspirators? Or did he even commit suicide? This ambiguity intensifies the emotional weight of the narrative. Karikalan's death, then, becomes a tragic symbol of how unresolved passions and historical forces converge in a single human life.

In the film, this ambiguity is largely resolved. *Ponniyin Selvan: Part II* stages the fatal encounter between Aditha Karikalan and Nandhini as an emotional and symbolic climax. Vikram's portrayal of Karikalan presents him as a prince hollowed out by remorse and desire. He travels to Kadambur not to seek vengeance but to submit to fate. The scene is rendered with poignant intimacy: Karikalan begs Nandhini to let go of her hatred, yet he also dares her to kill him if that will give her peace. The dagger, the tears, the candlelit room, and the soft string score turn the moment into a tableau of tragic inevitability. When Karikalan is stabbed, the film presents his death not as a mystery but as a final act of surrender—his acceptance of the consequences of the past. This choice eliminates the ambiguity that characterizes the novel but delivers a more emotionally decisive experience for the viewer.

The shift from ambiguity to clarity reflects a broader transformation in narrative approach. Literature thrives on mystery, nuance, and layered meanings. The novel's deliberate silence around Karikalan's death invites readers to reflect on fate, character, and the unknowability of human motivation. Cinema, especially mainstream historical cinema, often prioritizes dramatic closure and emotional impact. Mani Ratnam chooses to provide the audience with a powerful moment of release, giving Karikalan's arc a visual and moral resolution that literature resists. This is not a betrayal of

the source material but a necessary adaptation to the expectations of cinematic form.

Beyond this central event, the novel and film diverge in structure, pace, and tone. Kalki's novel is expansive, leisurely, and detailed. It takes the time to explore subplots involving Vandiyathevan's travels, Azhwarakkadiyan's investigations, the secrets of Sendhan Amudhan, and the maneuverings of Aniruddha Brahmarayar. These elements enrich the political landscape of the story, giving a sense of the many forces at play. The films, on the other hand, must condense the narrative to fit within a combined runtime of under six hours. Several subplots are abbreviated or omitted, and many supporting characters are given limited development. This compression sharpens the focus on the core triangle of Karikalan, Nandhini, and Arulmozhi Varman.

One of the most striking features of the novel is its language. Kalki's use of Tamil is both elegant and evocative. His prose often borders on poetry, especially in the internal monologues and philosophical reflections. The dialogues are rich with cultural texture, employing idioms and formal registers that root the characters in their time. The film, by necessity, simplifies this linguistic tapestry. While the screenplay preserves some classical expressions, much of the dialogue is streamlined for contemporary viewers. The result is a version of the Chola world that is visually magnificent but linguistically modern.

The themes of love, betrayal, duty, and destiny are present in both versions but acquire different shades depending on the medium. In the novel, the story unfolds like a chessboard of personal and political motivations. The tragic dimension emerges slowly, as each character becomes ensnared in the web of historical necessity. In the film, the tragedy is heightened by visual symbolism and musical cues. The soundtrack by A.R. Rahman plays a crucial role in evoking emotion, particularly in the scenes involving Karikalan and Nandhini. The visual splendor of the Chola court, the sweeping battle scenes, and the dramatic lighting all contribute to an aesthetic of grandeur that complements the narrative's epic tone.

The adaptation also raises questions about historical representation. Kalki's novel, while based on inscriptions

and chronicles, is ultimately a work of imagination. He weaves together fact and fiction to explore timeless human dilemmas through a specific cultural lens. Mani Ratnam's film similarly takes creative liberties, especially in costume design, production design, and choreography. While the film's visuals are spectacular, some historians have noted that they reflect a modern sensibility rather than strict historical accuracy. However, both works succeed in making the Chola period feel alive and relevant, connecting ancient dilemmas to contemporary audiences.

Audience reception, too, reveals interesting contrasts. Readers of the novel often describe it as a meditative and immersive experience. The pleasure lies in savoring the language, contemplating the mysteries, and revisiting characters over time. The film, by contrast, offers a more immediate engagement. The use of star power, visual spectacle, and narrative momentum make the film accessible to a broader audience, including those unfamiliar with the original. While some literary purists have criticized the simplifications and omissions, many viewers have praised the film for capturing the emotional and thematic essence of the source.

The enduring power of *Ponniyin Selvan* lies in its ability to speak across time and media. Kalki's novel and Mani Ratnam's films offer distinct yet interwoven interpretations of the same historical imagination. Where the novel sustains ambiguity and psychological nuance, the film embraces emotional closure and cinematic spectacle. The death of Aditha Karikalan, interpreted as a shadowy question in the novel and as a visual resolution in the film, exemplifies this transformation. Literature invites the reader into introspective depths, while cinema orchestrates a shared, immersive experience. Both forms, however, reaffirm the legacy of a story that transcends its origins, capturing the complexities of power, love, and fate. The shift from scroll to screen, rather than diminishing the work, reanimates it for new audiences, reaffirming its place in the cultural memory of Tamil heritage.

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