

The Tamil classic *Ponniyin Selvan* vs English Translation vs the Film Making

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Abstract

Kalki Krishnamurthy's *Ponniyin Selvan*, a classical Tamil historical novel, is celebrated as a literary masterpiece which portrays the grandeur of the Chola dynasty. The novel's depth is rooted in its classical Tamil language, poetic dialogues, and historical facts, making the novel a linguistic and cultural treasure. The English translation of *Ponniyin Selvan* bridges linguistic and cultural gaps, bringing the epic to a global audience. While translators have to retain the spirit of the original text, certain elements—like proverbs, metaphors, and historical context—may not have direct English equivalents and hence it loses its aesthetic pleasure at times. The cinematic adaptation of *Ponniyin Selvan* by Mani Ratnam, spanning two parts (PS-1 in 2022 and PS-2 in 2023), transforms the novel into a visual treatise. The film effectively produces the expansive narrative, making necessary modifications to fit the cinematic medium. The adaptation makes the characters live with us. This study explores the challenges and nuances in adapting *Ponniyin Selvan* across three mediums, that is, literature, translation, and film, which analyses how each transforms the novel's historical and cultural essence while catering to the needs of different audiences.

Keywords: Chola dynasty, translated version, cinematic adaptation

Ponniyin Selvan (The Son of Ponni) is a historical novel by Kalki Krishnamurthy, published in the 1950s. It's considered one of the greatest works of Tamil language and literature, retelling the history of the early years of the Chola Empire. The plot centres on the life of Arulmozhivarman (later Rajaraja Chola I), which explores the themes of power, family intrigue, politics, and war. Its translation version is also unique as that of the original work is considered. The spirit of the original text is very well kept at its high as that of the original and its aesthetic pleasure also remains. Even though some of its words and poetic lines are translated the work enchanted readers all over the world.

There have been several efforts to adapt *Ponniyin Selvan* for the big screen over the years, starting from M.G.R. time old days, Rajini Kanth time till Vijay. Even M.G.R is attracted towards the story and he wants to take the role of Vandhiya Devan, and Gemini Ganeshan as Raja Raja Cholan/ Arulmozhivarman. But the filmmaking of this wonderful novel has dropped out. Rajinikanth's period also made this art piece: as a visual form is left off as a real dream of doing it. Characters like Vandiyathevan, Nandhini, and Aditya Karikalan are deeply rooted in Tamil tradition and culture. Their names, motivations and dialogues carry a lot of cultural weight, which can be harder to convey effectively in English translation without losing their emotional attachment as real-life characters.

Ponniyin Selvan is one of Tamil literature's most highly famous and rich monumental works, written by Kalki Krishnamurthy, and it has been adapted both as a translated English novel and into a major Tamil film. The text, originally published in Tamil as a serialized form between 1950 and 1954, is a rich historical saga set during the Chola dynasty, filled with dramatic intrigue, romance, politics, and battles. The story was recently adapted into a two-part Tamil film by well-known director Mani Ratnam. When comparing the English translation (TL), Tamil original (SL), and film adaptation, there are various aspects to consider. Such as the essence or the very spirit of the text, then how it is represented in another language, and also how it is interpreted for the making of a film.

But the most recent and highly acclaimed adaptation of Mani Ratnam's dream of making two-part film series, *Ponniyin Selvan: I* (2022) and *Ponniyin Selvan: II* (2023) come alive. The actors like Karthi as Vandhiyadevan, Jeyam Ravi as Raja Raja Cholan, Trisha as Kundavai, Aishwarya Rai as Nandhini Devi, Nambi's character taken by Jeyaram is very apt. The actors' and actress choice of director is widely appreciated by the film industry. This adaptation of the novel brings Kalki's epic to a global audience, but as with any adaptation, there are so many challenges involved in translating the novel's complex and rich Tamil narrative to the visual medium.

The novel is written in classical Tamil language, with its rich cultural, historical, and literary perspectives. *Ponniyin Selvan* includes poetic dialogues, songs, deep character development, and cultural references that are very specific and unique towards Tamil history and its society. For instance, the use of proverbs, idiomatic expressions, and metaphors might carry

specific meanings only understood by native speakers or readers who are familiar with the Tamil language and culture. The chaste Tamil of those days create a rich deep historical experience throughout the novel that echoes the royalty of the Chola Dynasty.

Translating the novel into English is a highly challenging task as the ideas behind the words of the Tamil language are often difficult to identify and retain with that of the global language English. In the English-translated version, the translator has to balance maintaining the essence or spirit of the original text while ensuring the story as well as the idea can be understood by foreign readers.

The English translation of *Ponniyin Selvan* seeks to bring the grandeur and depth of the original Tamil work to a global audience. The translation, often handled by prominent translators like R. K. Narayan and others, aims to maintain the essence of the narrative, but some of the Tamil idioms, metaphors, and poetic rhythm and simile may be lost or altered altogether. Translating its historical and cultural references also becomes a challenge to the translator. As the social practices, politics, and religious aspects in Tamil may not have direct equivalents in English. While the plot remains the same, the texture of the narrative often changes, sometimes for clarity and also for brevity.

The richness and uniqueness of Tamil literature are inevitably lost or altered, especially in translating its cultural context and its linguistic expressions into English which cultural and linguistic aspects are entirely different. For instance, terms like “Kavalan” (protector or warrior), "Vijayanagara,"(this place is given as the honourable title for the soldier/King) or "Chola” (Title carried out throughout the entire dynasty or clan) carry cultural weight that does not have any apt direct English equivalent. The translator may opt to keep such untranslatable words in Tamil as it is (transliterate) or provide footnotes or explain it in the brackets next to the words as such, but it still lacks the original sound/tone and cultural concept they might have in their original language.

Written in Tamil by Kalki, *Ponniyin Selvan* is filled with the rich cultural, historical, and literary traditions of Tamil Nadu. The language used is poetic, which is deeply rooted in classical Tamil, but is also accessible in terms of its narrative style. The characters speak in a mix of formal and colloquial as well as classical Tamil, with the sudden beauty of its metaphor, proverb etc., that reflects the region’s heritage and the period's grandness. Cultural references, idioms,

and historical contexts are embedded inside the language itself, making it a treasure pot for Tamil readers.

Historical devices like the caste system, traditional functions, and rituals can be easily understood by Tamil-speaking audiences, whereas English translations might need explanatory notes to explain the various ideas. The Tamil reader experiences the novel with a deep understanding of its cultural and linguistic context, whereas an English reader may find the translation more detached, and the reader requires further historical and cultural knowledge regarding Tamil Nadu. The Chola empire, Tamil politics, and the specific nuances of Tamil classic society create challenges towards translating the text. The English translation may need to explain more or adapt these terms and concepts, which sometimes leads to a great loss of emotional depth or its impact towards the translation.

Mani Ratnam's *Ponniyin Selvan* two-part movie is a monumental effort in translating an epic novel into the visual mode. The director and his team had to decide which elements of the book could be visually presented, which characters could be developed in cinema and which scenes had to be omitted due to time and narrative constraints. The film adaptation includes some modern cinematic techniques such as CGI to portray grand battles, the esteemed Chola architecture, and its landscapes, but it should also remain faithful to the emotional and philosophical depth of the original Tamil text.

The novel's long narrative, with multiple characters and subplots, had to be compressed while making the movie. The story is spread across a large timeline, but the movie has to present a more streamlined plot, leading to certain subplots or characters being minimized or it should be removed completely.

The film can give us only glimpses of the inner suffering and complex political plot from the SL as well as the TL. For instance, the motivations behind Nandhini's plan against the Chola dynasty and Rajaraja Chola's characterizations are better enumerated in the book. In the movie, the characters of Vandiyathevan (played by Karthi) have been given a more action-oriented role, but the internal reflections and historical context are harder to express in the visual format in a 2 or more-hour film.

The novel runs nearly 2,500 pages in Tamil and in English still larger. And how the novel with five parts can be compressed into just two parts. Is a difficult job to translate as well as to change it as a visual form. Visual language vs. literary language are altogether or many times differs because the language used inside the text is highly classical whereas in movies it is somewhat different.

The cinematic adaptation of *Ponniyin Selvan* brings the grand world of the Cholas alive through visual storytelling regarding vast landscapes, fabulous palaces, epic battle scenes, and also intense political intrigue. However, visual imagery has its limitations then there. Some of the symbolic concepts inside the book (e.g., the metaphorical use of the river Ponni as a symbol of power and purity) are somewhat difficult to communicate fully throughout the film.

The power of silence or introspective moments in the novel, where characters think deeply or ask philosophical questions, must be translated into a visual or audio medium inside the film. Sometimes it loses its depth of internal dialogue between characters or monologue at times. The Tamil-speaking audience can directly relate to the cultural idea, but for global audiences, especially in other foreign language-speaking regions, *Ponniyin Selvan* had to be presented in a way that didn't appeal to the Tamil diaspora only but also to a wider international audience.

Subtitles and voiceovers help to translate Tamil dialogues into English, but even here, subtleties in meaning and also its emotion can be lost. The film also takes artistic liberties with certain historical facts or dramatic embellishments to make the plot more interesting for non-Tamil audiences who may not be familiar with the Chola Empire's history. A book like *Ponniyin Selvan* relies heavily on language to convey depth, philosophical dialogue, and personal reflections towards the story. The translation needs to capture these moments while making sure the historical context of the novel is not lost in its translation or in the art of filmmaking.

In filmmaking, the focus shifts to visual aesthetics that is the richness of the palaces, the beauty of the costumes, and the intensity of battle scenes. It's about showing, not telling, and it often sacrifices the internal duality of characters in favour of creating a greater visual experience. In translation, an English version of *Ponniyin Selvan* might filter the emotional connection for native Tamil speakers, who can pick up on regional references, dialects, classical language and its cultural concept.

The film, on the other hand, attempts to bridge the gap by presenting the emotions audiovisually through acting, music, and cinematography. Yet, it faces its limitations in delivering the in-depth emotional and philosophical layers between the dialogue which the novel provides.

While both the Tamil-to-English translation of *Ponniyin Selvan* and Mani Ratnam's film adaptation aim to bring the story to the worldwide audience, they do so in their unique style. Each medium has its strengths, but both face the challenge of staying true to the spirit of the original text while reaching a new set of readers and audiences.

“The translation can only partially convey the complexity of the original Tamil, while the film adapts the novel's epic scope into a more cinematic form, emphasizing visuals and drama over the intricate detail of Kalki's text. In his novel, Kalki underscores the fallacy of grading human beings based on their caste, class or gender”, says Gowri.
<https://www.thehindu.com/books/interview-ponniyin-selvan>.

The characters are described in great detail with elaborate inner monologues, and their cultural backgrounds and motivations are depicted. Kalki's writing captures the psychology of every character, allowing Tamil readers to relate with them on a deep emotional level. Even in those days, readers name their children with the novel's characters. My neighbouring children were named after Vandhiyadevan, Nandhini and so on. Kalki created such craze all over Tamil-speaking readers.

The characters in the English version, while retaining their fundamental attributes and actions, may lose some of the rich cultural ideas that informed their personalities. The translators often provide meaning next to the word in brackets or footnotes to explain cultural references or historical events of that particular time, but even with these additions, the characters might come across as unique due to foreign language and the entire cultural differences. But the meanings and ideas which the character conveys will never change.

Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan* is notable for its detailed and intricated narrative structure, weaving multiple subplots, time shifts, and a cast of characters into a coherent historical story. It is built like a historical epic, with a sense of grandeur in the art of storytelling. While the

translation tries to capture the grand scope of the story, the density of the narrative may be sometimes streamlined or condensed/compressed.

The film adaptation by Mani Ratnam (released in 2022 and 2023 as two parts) brings the story to be alive on screen, which provides altogether a new interpretation of the novel. The film comparatively differs entirely to both the original Tamil text SL and the English translation SL. Some complexities of the story might be simplified to make it easier for non-Tamil-speaking audiences to follow, and some minor subplots may be minimized or lost inside the audio-visual mode (movie).

Visual representation vs. literary imagination is like adapting the literary work from one genre to another genre. That is the novel is remade with that of a picture, and the dialogue of the novel is changed as drama's dialogue. The classic dialogue of the novel has not changed altogether but at times it changed according to the recent generation audience. While the novel paints vivid pictures of the Chola empire, *Ponniyin Selvan* (the film) brings those images to life with grand sets of CGIS making and apt costumes like the classical Tamil king. The visual medium makes the viewers see and enjoy the ancient palaces, and visualize grand battlefields, and lush greenish landscapes, something that takes a lot of imagination to view in one's mind's eye. And the description in the book runs page after page. Mani Ratnam's choice of certain visual metaphors and symbolic imagery may add layers of interpretation, but it does not present in the novel; yet gives the feel of harmony with the spirit of Kalki's original work.

The film adaptation is more closely associated with the Tamil original in terms of dialogue and characterization, though the narrative flow has been changed to fit the cinematic format. Since the original dialogues and culture are Tamil, they carry a more emotional weight for Tamil-speaking viewers. English-speaking audiences may not always enjoy this depth of aesthetic pleasure, although the subtitles help in bridging the gap between the language. However, the film's cinematic style often gives importance to its emotional impact over in-depth historical detail, making it more understandable to a worldwide audience.

Due to the time limit, the film condenses the novel elegantly. In the books, the characters are explained in much greater detail, with many side characters and detailed subplots. But in the film, the focus is more on the core characters like Arulmozhivarman, Nandhini, Aditya Karikalan, and others, and many side characters are reduced or given less importance. The

political plot and the tension between the Chola princes are still present on screen, but the film streams the action to fit within the scope of a two-part movie.

In terms of action sequences and music, the film version takes full support from the visual and auditory medium. The grand battles, royal conspiracies, and dramatic confrontations are brought to life in a way that the novel could only imply through its narrative technique. A.R. Rahman's music enhances the emotional and historical context, blending the traditional sound with that of modern instruments to evoke the sense of the ancient Chola world. The use of colourful landscapes and costumes adds to the film's antique nature, making the historical setting feel alive and giving aesthetic pleasure.

In the film, the language of the dialogue is mostly Tamil, although some English subtitles are used in specific scenes, especially for the sake of international audiences. The Tamil dialogues often carry more emotional depth and complexity, particularly in terms of historical context and social antiques. English-speaking audiences watching the film with subtitles might lose some of these values and ideas, although the film does a good job of portraying emotions through the actors' and actresses' performances.

In the film, character development is high and efficient, and the actors are very much involved in the story. The depth that Kalki's narrative provides through monologues and internal thoughts of a particular character is entirely different from the character that is pictured outside: for example, Uthama Chola's character is entirely different, which is conveyed in actions, expressions, and small conversations inside the movie. Some characters who have a significant spark in the novel, such as the cunning Nandhini, might not receive as much attention as in the original text. However, the film still conveys the key emotional beats with the characters and the relationships between every character, such as the love and rivalry between the Chola brothers, through a visual mode of storytelling.

The original Tamil *Ponniyin Selvan* carries a deep cultural and linguistic richness that any English translation might struggle to fully retain its original spirit. The translation focuses on the narrative part of it but loses some of the identity and emotional weight portrayed in the original Tamil novel.

Mani Ratnam's *Ponniyin Selvan* film adaptation takes creative liberties in streamlining the story for cinematic purposes, focusing only on grand visuals, action, and character importance and relationships. While it captures the real essence/spirit of the novel, it cannot include every detail of Kalki's enormous narrative. Some of the philosophical and cultural details of the book are lost inside the film, but it succeeds in capturing a glimpse of every scene which it portrays and the emotional core of the story is at its best.

“Ultimately, the *Ponniyin Selvan* film adaptation is a visual representation that brings the characters and history to life for modern audiences, while the original Tamil novel remains a literary masterpiece with deeper cultural and emotional resonance”
<https://www.indianculture.gov.in/ebooks/colas-voli>.

Both versions translation as well as the movie, however, preserve the heart of Kalki's saga, presenting the power struggle, the fight for justice, and the enduring legacy of the Chola dynasty to the world. “The world of *Ponniyin Selvan* is worth exploring: through the book, or if you aren't prepared to invest as much time, then through the movie. As with all great works, it's a layered and complex narrative, albeit presented straightforwardly. It tells a lot about India, its history and its people, and is a stunning piece of Indian historical fiction”
<https://medium.com/@soundarya1103/ponniyin-selvan-the-movie-the-books-and-a-word-on-translations>”.

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