

**THE ARCHITECTS OF CHOZHA DESTINY: POLITICAL AGENCY in
KALKI'S PONNIYIN SELVAN**

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ABSTRACT:

This research article investigates the intricate political agency of female characters in Kalki Krishnamurthy's historical novel, Ponniyin Selvan, arguing that the narrative undermines conventional patriarchal historiography by portraying women as the principal architects of the Chozha Empire's political destiny. The comprehensive analysis transcends traditional literary criticism, which frequently oversimplifies these characters, instead applying a tripartite Western feminist theoretical framework to deconstruct their diverse power dynamics. Specifically, the paper uses Simone de Beauvoir's concept of transcendence vs. immanence to analyse the character of Princess Kundavai as an intellectual kingmaker who explicitly rejects domestic confinement for political governance. It also employs Margaret Atwood's theories on survival and weaponised femininity to examine Nandhini, the vengeance-seeking Pazhuvur queen, demonstrating how she transforms objectification into a tool of political insurrection and empire-breaking. Furthermore, the analysis applies Rachel Carson's ecofeminist lens to the boatwoman Poonguzhali, interpreting her life on the sea as a rejection of civilisational patriarchy and a radical assertion of autonomy through nature. The findings reveal that Kalki creates a complex Alli Rajyam (Kingdom of Women) where female characters—through strategy, calculated rage, or ecological independence—effectively manage the succession crisis and the male egos driving the state. Ultimately, the article concludes that Ponniyin Selvan constitutes a remarkable feminist intervention in historical fiction, positioning women not as bystanders but as the indispensable subjects who shape the narrative of 10th-century Chozha politics.

Keywords: Feminist Literary Criticism, Transcendence, Ecofeminism, Survival Theory.

1. Introduction

One is not born but becomes a woman – Simon De Beauvoir

This existential dictum resonates across historical and literary canvases, where female characters actively shaped their identity through action rather than passively accepting a societal mould. For instance, Queen Elizabeth I refused the domestic immanence of marriage to transcend into the political subject of England, defining herself as the 'Virgin Queen' committed to governance, thereby becoming a monarch on her own terms. In history, the warrior queen Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi embodies this becoming, as she was forced by circumstance and colonial threat to abandon traditional feminine roles and take up arms.

Similarly, in literature, Sophocles' Antigone became a woman defined not by her gender role but by her ultimate political and moral act of defiance against the state, choosing eternal law over civic obedience. This transformative act of "becoming"—whether through sovereignty, insurrection, or moral choice—is what elevates Kalki Krishnamurthy's female characters beyond mere supporting roles, mirroring these global examples of self-willed destiny.

Historical fiction often runs the risk of reducing women to ornamental bystanders—silently weaving garlands while men weave history with swords. However, Kalki Krishnamurthy's magnum opus, *Ponniyin Selvan*, defies this convention with a radical assertion: in the Chozha Empire, the sword is merely a tool of the state, but the mind is the state itself. And the sharpest minds in Kalki's 10th-century Tamil Nadu belong to women.

Set during the turmoil of the Chozha dynasty, the narrative is ostensibly about the succession struggle. Yet, a closer reading reveals that the male characters are largely pawns moving across a chessboard designed and controlled by two formidable women: the Chozha Princess Kundavai and the vengeance-seeking Queen of Pazhuvor, Nandini.

This research article explores the political agency of women in *Ponniyin Selvan*. Kalki subverts traditional patriarchal historiography by positioning women not as victims of politics, but as its primary architects. To rigorously analyse these dynamics, this paper employs a tripartite theoretical framework: Simone de Beauvoir's concept of transcendence vs. immanence to understand Kundavai's rejection of domesticity; Margaret Atwood's theories on survival and weaponised femininity to deconstruct Nandini's antagonism; and Rachel Carson's ecofeminist lens to interpret the autonomy of the boatwoman Poonguzhali.

2.Literature Review

The existing scholarship on *Ponniyin Selvan* has long acknowledged the prominence of its female characters, often citing the famous lament of the elder statesman Periya Pazhuvettaraiyar: "My God! My heart burns, and my blood boils at this outrage. Why should we live like this, losing our honour and prestige, prostrating at the feet of a King who consults the women in his harem on political matters? Our empire is now governed by females; we have a veritable Alli Rajyam (Kingdom of Women) on our hands. (I- 68)"

Early critiques of the novel focused on the dichotomy between the "good" woman (Kundavai, the nurturer of the state) and the "bad" woman (Nandini, the destroyer).

Traditional Tamil literary criticism often framed Nandini as a *femme fatale* or a *Mohini*, a mythological temptress who distracts the hero from his path. However, post-colonial and feminist readings have begun to rehabilitate Nandini, viewing her not as a villain but as a subaltern figure striking back at the empire that marginalised her.

Scholars have also noted the unique position of Sembiyan Mahadevi, the dowager queen, whose power is derived from religious piety—a "soft power" that influences the "hard power" of the throne. Yet, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the application of western feminist political theory to these indigenous characters. While comparisons to Lady Macbeth are common, few studies have examined Poonguzhali through an ecofeminist lens or analysed Nandini's manipulations through the prism of Atwoodian survivalism. This article seeks to bridge that gap.

3.Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to deconstruct the gendered power dynamics in Ponniyin Selvan to reveal how female characters navigate and dismantle patriarchal structures. Specifically, this article aims to:

1. Analyse Princess Kundavai's political maneuverings through Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist framework questions how she achieves "transcendence" in a male-dominated court.
2. Examine Nandini's use of sexuality and deception as tools of political insurrection, using Margaret Atwood's insights into power and the female body.
3. Explore Poonguzhali's relationship with nature as a rejection of civilisational patriarchy, applying Rachel Carson's ecofeminist philosophy.
4. Determine whether Kalki's portrayal of women constitutes a true feminist intervention in historical fiction.

4.Findings and Analysis

4.1.The Refusal of Immanence: Kundavai and Simone de Beauvoir

In her book, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir illustrates that Western civilisation has a fundamental disparity in how it defines gender. The masculine is considered the global standard, while the feminine is only defined in relation to it. Beauvoir contends that men are perceived as the definitive Subject, whilst women are assigned the role of the "Other", a classification that legitimises their systemic subjugation. This dichotomy is not only a gendered occurrence, but it also illustrates a broader sociological mechanism of distinction employed to marginalise diverse groups, including racial and class minorities. According to Beauvoir (1949), "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man, and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential rather than the essential (5)." He is the Subject, and he is the Absolute; she is the Other. This concept shows that patriarchal systems depend on making women seem unimportant to keep men in charge.

The Duality of Transcendence and Immanence

Beauvoir differentiates between two modalities of human existence: "transcendence", defined by creative, progressive actions that validate existence, and "immanence", which encompasses repetitive, maintenance-focused labour. In the past, males have been able to transcend the mundane by inventing, exploring, and learning new things, while women have been stuck in the mundane, doing chores, cooking, and raising children. Beauvoir recognises the necessity of immanence for survival, yet she contends that it is existentially constraining, as it "consumes time and energy yet achieves nothing of fundamental significance." Nonetheless, she addresses these themes with subtlety, acknowledging that immanent work may occasionally be creative (such as knitting) and transcendent duties may be repetitive; however, the societal division of labour remains distinctly gendered, confining women to cycles of futility rather than durability.

Beauvoir's Scholarship: Bias vs. Advocacy

This study supports Beauvoir against claims of "gender bias" by arguing that even while she has a clear goal of promoting women's freedom, her study is nonetheless thorough and well-supported. Beauvoir does not conceal her bias in favour of women's liberation, asking, "How

can independence be regained in a condition of dependency?" What factors restrict women's freedom, and how can these be surmounted? This stance is not a bias that detracts from her work; instead, it is an essential position to reveal the mechanisms of oppression. By carefully defining her terms and appreciating the intricacies of human behaviour, Beauvoir substantiates her critique of patriarchy. Her work is not "biased" in a negative or unacademic way; rather, it is a conscious, intellectually sound attempt to show how society "dooms [woman] to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed."

Princess Kundavai is the embodiment of the refusal of immanence. Unlike the typical princess of folklore who waits to be married off to secure an alliance, Kundavai explicitly rejects marriage if it means leaving her motherland. "I have vowed not to go out of this country, marriage or no marriage...if at all I decide to marry, I will marry a soldier of our kingdom. He won't have a country of his own apart from our kingdom. He won't insist on taking me to some other country. He will love to stay with me in our palace."... So you won't go out of Chozha country? ... Even if somebody makes me the queen of the heavens, I won't go (I 102)." She tells her father, Emperor Sundara Chozha, that she will not be a pawn in a matrimonial treaty. Kundavai refuses to "become" the woman her society expects. Instead, she becomes a kingmaker.

Kundavai's power is not derived from a husband; it is derived from her intellect. She effectively runs the Chozha intelligence network. She creates the hospitals, manages the public image of the monarchy, and strategically keeps her brother, Arulmozhi Varman (the future Raja Raja Chozha), away from the capital to protect him.

In Beauvoir's terms, men are usually the "Subject" (the protagonist) and women are the "Other" (the object acted upon). Kundavai reverses this. She treats the men around her—including the protagonist Vandiyathevan—as objects to be moved for the greater good of the Chozha empire. When Vandiyathevan flirts with her, she enjoys it but never loses sight of his utility as a spy/messenger. She maintains her status as the Subject.

4.2. Weaponised Femininity and Survival: Nandini and Margaret Atwood

If Kundavai represents power within the system, Nandini represents the rage of those crushed by it. Nandini, the orphan of uncertain parentage who rose to become the Queen of Pazhuvor, is the novel's most complex figure. If Kundavai is compared with the Goddess Lakshmi, Nandini is compared with goddess Kali. "Nandini's face shone in fury, with a rare kind of cruel beauty, like the face of Bhadrakali, the furious goddess, who demanded blood from the Kapalikas" (III 138).

Margaret Atwood, particularly in works like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Robber Bride*, explores how women in dystopian or oppressive patriarchies use the very tools of their oppression to survive. In her critical study *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Atwood (1972) explores survival through multiple lenses... ultimately exhorting women to "refuse to be a victim" (p. 36). Royal lineage hindered Nandini's childhood and threatened her existence. Politics around her turned her into an orphan. To survive, she has to become a weapon against the Chozha successors. She mentions that "I know who am I and why was I born into this world. God has given me only one indication" (III 136).

Atwood's characters often wear masks of compliance to hide revolutionary intent. Nandini wears the mask of the adoring, beautiful younger wife to the elderly Periya Pazhuvettaraiyar. She performs the role of the "damsel" so perfectly that the men do not see the dagger until it

is too late. She uses her beauty—the quality for which she is objectified—as a weapon to entrap the Chozha generals. While she mentions the Pallava Prince

Parthibendra Pallavan, she says, "Within ten minutes of meeting me, he became as subdued as my lapdog." He forgot his duty to the Crown Prince and follows me like a pet. He is waiting at my feet, ready to fulfil even the slightest of my whims. And yet when he is near me he is trembling (III 139). Her beauty is her weapon against the men. Ravidasan reassured Nandhini about her oath, saying, "You swore that you had more reasons for revenge than those men." You also promised to use your beauty and intelligence for that ghastly enterprise. You told them that you would go out of your way to help them in their mission. And once you have fulfilled your oath, you would end your life (I 336).

Nandini's politics are not about "empire building" (like Kundavai) but about "empire breaking." This aligns with Atwood's exploration of female rage. Nandini constructs a shadow government within the palace. She unites the enemies of the Chozhas (the Pandyas), not because she believes in their cause, but because they are useful tools for her personal vengeance against Aditha Karikalan. In an Atwoodian sense, Nandini is a victim who refuses to remain a victim, transforming her trauma into political terrorism. She proves that in a patriarchy, a woman's "soft power" can dismantle "hard power" infrastructures. Nandhini states that

The whole country knows that the Junior Queen of Pazhuvur, well known for her beauty, is also fond of beautifying herself with the finest of dresses and jewels. I keep myself beautiful twenty-four hours of the day. Poor Soul, the Senior Pazhuvettaraiyar! He thinks I am beautifying myself only for him and his honour. He is pleased. He does not know about the fire that's constantly burning in my chest. (III 139)

4.3. The Ecofeminist Reject: Poonguzhali and Rachel Carson

While Kundavai and Nandini fight for control of the civilised world (raised within palace walls), Poonguzhali (Samudrakumari) rejects it entirely. Unlike her royal counterparts, she possesses practical survival skills that allow her to navigate dangerous terrains and open oceans, serving as a vital force for morale during crises. A profound lover of nature, Poonguzhali is characterized by her uninhibited expression; she is a "chatterbox" who speaks her mind freely, lacking the guarded artifice of the court, representing a raw, unfiltered spirit that thrives outside the confines of urban civilisation.

(The name Poonguzhali literally means a woman who has flowers on her hair.) Her long curly hair fell beautifully on her well-rounded shoulders. She wore a garland of seashells and cowries, which she had gathered on the shore. However, these did not enhance her beauty; in fact, they seemed more beautiful because they adorned her. If the Goddess of Beauty chose to have an earthly form, it would be that girl. Naturally jewels and flowers could never add to her beauty. (II 9)

Rachel Carson, in *The Sea Around Us* and *Silent Spring*, posits a view of the world where nature is the ultimate reality and human attempts to control it are arrogant and destructive. Ecofeminism connects the domination of nature with the domination of women, suggesting both are victims of patriarchal greed.

Poonguzhali lives in the liminal space between land (culture/patriarchy) and sea (nature/chaos). She specifically despised the "civilised" lives of the cities, calling them cramped and deceitful. This mirrors Carson's critique of industrial/modern arrogance. Poonguzhali finds true freedom only in the ocean, where the laws of men do not apply.

Poonguzhali, unlike the court ladies confined by walls and silks, is physically robust and independent. She rows across the ocean to Sri Lanka alone. In the context of the 10th century, she is a radical anomaly. Through a Carsonian lens, Poonguzhali represents the "wild feminine"—unpolluted by social conditioning. She aids the Prince not for political gain but often out of a primal sense of right and wrong or personal whim. She is the only character who sees the "Emperor" as just another man who can drown like anyone else. Nature is the ultimate equaliser, and Poonguzhali is its avatar.

A complete finding must address Vanathi, who is often dismissed as "meek". However, through a feminist lens, Vanathi represents the "self-sacrificing" archetype, weaponised for agency. She uses her fainting spells and perceived fragility to draw attention and sympathy, eventually securing the position of queen. It is a different strategy—submission as a path to power—which, while less modern than Kundavai's, is historically potent.

Sembiyan Mahadevi represents a "matriarchal conscience." She uses religion to regulate the violence of the state. In a world of war-mongering men, she builds temples. This aligns with cultural feminism, which argues that women often bring a distinct, non-violent ethic to governance.

5. Conclusion

Kalki's Ponninyin Selvan is not merely a historical romance; it is a sophisticated political thriller where the primary tension is not between kingdoms but between genders. Applying the lenses of Beauvoir, Atwood, and Carson reveals a startling modernity in Kalki's characterisations: Kundavai proves that a woman can transcend her biological destiny to become the "subject" of history. Poonguzhali offers an ecofeminist critique, showing that true freedom lies entirely outside the patriarchal walls.

"Son of Ponni" (Arulmozhi Varman) may be the titular hero, but the novel confirms that he was moulded, protected, challenged, and nearly destroyed by the daughters of the land. The politics of the Chozha empire, as rendered by Kalki, is the politics of women effectively managing the egos of men.

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