

**Reiteration of Longing Assertion of the Self, Past and an Ethnic Root:  
A Comparative Study of  
*Kallikaatu Ithigasam* and *Kalmaram***

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**Abstract**

The human mind is the repository of a vast recollection of events either factual or imaginary. The memory of such a human perpetually designs its stories attaching significance to the most appealing or the traumatic ones, both personal and collective. The aesthetic symbols, narrative descriptions of a particular culture, tradition, its deeply embedded thoughts, emotions and feelings, traces of ancient features dominate in those memory narrative discourses of the writers. Besides delegating on the autumn side, the desolate atmosphere prevailing in the moods of the twentieth century is also captured to bring a reversion of contemporary India and its evacuation of antique sensibility of Indianness. The writers of Tamil literature stand closer to evince both the fortunes accumulated and also the ethnic, communal, regional imbalances inside India in an apodictic manner. In this way, both the legends of Tamil writings such as Kavignar Vairamuthu and Thilagavathy acquire a distinct place and possess a peculiar role to play in the life of every person of independent India. They narrate the plight of independent India which is still half way through the journey of survival and a peaceful mode of living. *Kallikaatu Ithigasam* of Kavignar Vairamuthu and *Kalmaram* of Thilagavathy unravel the fatal livings of common people who are denied their right to breathe the breeze of peace. The memory of both the writers tends to explore the narrative aspects slicing the true side of the unexplored people belonging to rural areas.

**Keywords:** Vairamuthu, Thilagavathy, *Kallikaatu Ithigasam*, *Kalmaram* Recollection, personal memory, collective memory, culture, tradition, narrative discourse.

Emotional outlet, appropriately being sketched revealing the heart breaking characters and their characterisation, events and occurrences, the emotions and the feelings of the characters who are really able to somehow manage declining from the original roots and their own ethnic places, the sensational dilemmas and altercations from deep inside the memory of almost all humans, the novel *Kallikattu Ithihasam* of Kavignar Vairamuthu serves to be the outpour of the writer exactly outlining the drowsy numbness that still exists in the thoughts of the characters of one of the southernmost parts of Tamil Nadu.

Several attempts have been made to draw on the various features and tributes of the most hidden parts of Tamil Nadu. Yet, a unique attribute is traced within the works of Kavignar Vairamuthu due to his first hand experience. Besides, he is also skilful in providing a detailed description of the most common things that have ever existed which are then found to be extinct in his adulthood. Though he has lived only up to a certain period of time in his native, those limited days of his life have provided him with enough observations of life and manners of his original clan.

The way he brings himself out through his protagonist deserves to be merited. The employment of first person narration, his rhetorical questioning of where those wonders of the recent past have gone, where are the clouds, skies, plants, animals, herbs, shrubs, hills, mountains, the variedness of faces, their hunger, the truth being embedded in their poverty, the pain of rejection, the dreams not attained, the culture and moments of desperation, the failures, mutual adjustments, being for each other in spite of the many irresistible compromises between partners, a male dedicating his whole life for the family, a female ready to die for her man, no matter however his past may be, the unconquerable trust among people, the deep empathy a man has for his native place and things and at the same time, the tradition of widow remarriage, the patriarchal domination and the most painful intrusion of Earth's backlash as a means of devastating them and their livelihood in the name of erection of dams.

This is an extraordinary epic which asserts the truth of an utterly deserted or buried place, giving birth to huge Vaigai Dam. The terrible looks glue together in the eyes of the vast acres of the villages, their moan and groan could be drawn before the eyes, who and whose belongings have been already immersed in the vast water body swallowing their dreams as well. He acknowledges that the minute details of his characters have been carved out of his love for his grandfathers who are the real victims for the monstrous erection of the Vaigai dam. He feels embarrassed for not having delivered the epic long before which, he calmly accepts, is due to his orientation towards an alien lifestyle of westernisation.

All such detailed enumerations are drawn from the remunerative recollection of events past and passed. His nature to cull out peculiar events in the life of a common man and his livelihood has not involved much risk, as it is a rough draft of his own forefathers, just penning the fair draft with different names. The narrative takes various forms with an imperfect chronological order but showcasing the actual events. The characters themselves are the real caricatures exhibiting their flaws and fluctuations or their actions exhibit those flaws. Flashbacks, yet another postmodern aspect linearly adopted with Peyathevar, alternately switch from the present to the past and from the past to the present. Fragmentation of incidents in the life of the protagonist, Peyathevar, is clearly put together bringing the life of Peyathevar. Of course, for a successful accreditation of a novel, its fictional colouring is essential in spite of its depiction of facts.

The innate hard work, honesty, emotional outlet, real manly behaviour, truth oriented in spite of the hard-hearted poverty, the barrenness of the land being restricted the offerings by nature and

Goddess themselves are well wrought out by the narrator. The memory serves to narrate the picture of a perfect, once nature embellished, village sheltering karuvelam trees, potthakalli, kiluvai, katalai, chappathikalli, ilandhai, nerunji, chillie, pirandai, intenjadi, soorankodi shading animals like wolves, onan, aranai, oonthe, scorpion, snakes, quail, sparrows, ullan and vallooru.

The memory of the narrator rests on the breaking labour of the villages amidst the huge rocks, the saralai soil, sukkan stones, and thorn born fields. It talks on the immense efforts taken by the heroic figure Peyathevar who esteems ploughing and worships the land for having sheltered them from long back and for having offered them the grandest of life amidst some short comings. He sees the land as a nurse and nurturer, nature and the land ever has cradled them all giving them surplus powers to smoothen life.

Peyathevar is a man of valour, wearing a turban, holding the oxen, ploughing the land cleaving the soil and being one among the cows; the narrator puts forward the intimacy that the heroic figure has with the land and cows. His affinity towards the soil and the land is seen in his words, “This soil is our food, this is our medicine” (17). He quotes, “no artificial fertilizer can be equalled to the goat dung and the urine of the cow” (18).

The story revolves around Peyathevar, his widowed daughter Chellathayi, her being remarried after being widowed, Mokkarasu, the son of Chellathayi, the influencing personality in the life of Peyathevar, his wife Alagamma, the girl whom Peyathevar has loved in his young age.

The narrative focuses on how Mokkarasu as a young boy of two years shedding tears being unable to leave his mother, stands alone after she gets remarried. As a widow, her emotional outpour is portrayed as someone who is unable to desert her young one in the hands of the parents yet follows the husband to rescue herself. The destiny of the son brings tears. His recollection later exposes the true side of Mokkarasu, who then from the heart reveals how he has loved the mother though she happens to bear the son of another man. With tears, he looks at his mother sleeping tiredly without blinking the eyes.

The narrative memory of Peyathevar serves to expose the reality of his wife without whom Peyathevar feels vague to survive. She is highlighted as a woman responsible for holding the clutches of a family together, which has been the key factor of ancient livelihood. Most of the time Peyathevar is seen recollecting things and words of his wife through which the adolescent love of Peyathevar with Murugayi is brought out. Circumstances have forced them to distance themselves due to caste and creed. In spite of the affinity of her husband with another lady during his past years, she stands up for her husband, defies the village clan when he brings the widowed Murugayi, a girl from the house of barber. It is the wife who trusts Peyathevar in all crucial days. From the day of her entry into Peyathevar’s, Murugayi becomes one among them. Chellathayi scorns Murugayi for having entered into his mother’s life and destroying their livelihood, but only Peyathevar and his wife have a bond which can deeply explain the truthfulness of Murugayi. It is understandable and deeply moving in the parts where Murugayi is seen serving Peyathevar’s just like a mother. Besides,

the love episodes of Peyathevar and his wife are exactly true and honest, that they both account for the ingredients of cultural anticipation. Hence, there is always a bond between Peyathevar and his wife which is to be contrasted with the contemporary life style. The writer through his narrative memory not only puts forth the traditional values that have once existed but also the absence of such values in the present world. He is also contemptuous about the greediness of the present society stressing on the vitality of the values and respect for the land and soil that have been nurtured by the ancestors which are to be imbibed and cultivated by the descendents for the peaceful mode of living.

Especially while bringing about the character of Chellathayi, the narrator is strong in attributing her manliness in all her household responsibilities equalling her to a man of great endeavours. It quotes, “One has never seen her with a smile. The oily face and the thick oiled hair make her the girl of stubbornness. She is a bit reluctant to accept things that do suit her” (31). “She is extremely nervous, girl of intense anger, body of valour, she has the tenderness of a lamb, will even go to the extent of taking the life of mischievous” (32).

Besides the narration of the tenderness of Chinnathayi, her being a victim of cruelty in the hands of destiny is seen. A wave of fate approaches in the name of marriage which destines her to be a widow, along with a son. The custom progresses for widow remarriage, but Chellathayi suffers in the hands of her husband who does not accept her son but only her. As a result, she is compelled to give up her son Mokkarasu, who is also denied the love of a mother after the loss of his father. He longs for love and affection, but later understands his mother to be a property of another man gets and is torn into pieces yet takes life as it is.

Peyathevar is the real victim of all kinds of sufferings through whose son the negative side is pictured. Being born to a man of heroic acts, Chinnu grows up to be an irresponsible spendthrift who is good for nothing. He lacks both patience and perseverance. Though Peyathevar gets his son married, he finds him being a vagabond, roaming with useless fellows and at times fighting with Peyathevar for the property.

The memory also narrates the custom of circumstition being done to Mokkarasu and brings out the rituals of the villages. Such a world of rituals, customs and manners receives a cultural shock when the people from the city dump themselves in with the construction of dams. They have never dreamt that their lives will be demolished giving way to huge dams and reservoirs. They have never dreamt that the very same water which they consider to be the life source and elixir is going to immerse them with its mighty strength.

The memory then switches over to the agitated crowd which resists in accepting the invitation of lands instead of this land in places such as Hills of Pachakamatchi and Thaandikudi. They oppose getting lands from those places simply because they have seen people of such villages struggle for a living. The village elders such as Karatupatti Kalyanithevar, Nayakkar decline to accept the offer being unable to desert the land where their fathers and forefathers have had their existence. They quote, “How can a person forget the place, the land and nature herself from where he belongs to?”

Can it be equalled to thousands of acres being offered by the government? How is it possible to forget the tears and sweat that they have shed all those years?" (295).

Meanwhile, a few villagers start moving to various nearby villages. The final section outlines the naive sentimentalist Peyathevar who feels that it is impossible to desert his native land, the slang, emotional world and sentiments. He gets immersed in the water implying sarcastically that the old things are replaced by new things, but a new era of darkness has swallowed not only the land and the lives of a particular clan, but their values, morality, customs and ideals, manliness and the will to break the rock.

Hence, the memory of the narrator reveals events, images and occurrences in the life of Peyathevar through an incoherent narrative which is improperly built without a proper beginning, middle and an end, with a twisted turn, a swinging movement from the present to the past to replenish events. It is through the voice of Peyathevar that the narrator and the writer Kavignar Vairamuthu deliberately accounts on how his native clan has been completely washed out stepping inside a new era which shows no sign of values, culture, customs or any tradition.

Awe inspiring social activities of people make the society to thrive with precious values. The society with excellence serves to be the functional part of a successful civilization. Where there are opportunities for man to be natural and objective, causes for oppression, violence, hunger and poverty get evaded. The social activists acting as path makers serve as the catalyst connecting man with man, teaching them to be balanced maintaining the society with humanity. One among the successful social activists and former Commissioner, Madam Thilagavathy I.P.S. considers it as her duty to educate men of the contemporary society to serve humankind. She is frank in drawing the commonest side of India, resembling Wordsworthian adaptation of lives and manners of a common man. In spite of having played a crucial role, after stepping into the world of criminals and the guilty she finds a sense of attachment with the other side of men; where survival of life is in itself the hardest job ever. Thilagavathy narrates about the plight of such people who are naive, sentimentalist, innocent but not rich elites, not preachers of values but the common, modest and poor creatures on whose patience and perseverance, the honesty and truthfulness the whole universe functions.

No matter however problematic the situation might be, these naive emotionalists tackle everything without giving room to indifferences. It is the firm faith in things and their earnest devotion towards any deed that makes them to be God-like. Exactly resembling their mind, their dreams are also visualised to be simple, calm and quiet. They are not notable personalities, yet they are people who are considered to be saviours of millions of aristocratic livelihoods or the whole universe. They cradle and embrace men if they are found to be elegant and are ready to throttle men of the venomous kind. Whatever their plight is, they still exist amidst the spider web of difficulties. Quoting from Thomas Gray, an elegant English writer's "Elegy," these common men of such merit are left unnoticed.

Hence, Thilagavathy through all her mind-blowing experiences tries to weigh the glories of such common men and their contribution in the making of a venerable society. A powerful and painful depiction of the lives of the construction workers as it is. *Kalmaram* of Thilagavathy talks in plenty about the workers whose whole world is their hard, manual labour throughout the year.

The narrator appealingly brings together the harmless materialistic fervour of the middle-class families, their rice bearing lands and the lakes and ponds which have started becoming buildings accommodating millions of outsiders. The tremendous rapid changes have taken over in the later half of the twentieth century. Thilagavathy explores the dark side of the middle-class people who are still a prey in the hands of the real estate brokers. The recollection of the ill-treatment being attributed to the construction workers who have migrated, uprooting themselves from their native places, to take shelter in far away towns and cities, just to cater their basic needs of food, clothing are being deprived of proper rain and with improper amenities in the field of agricultural works.

In spite of their hard work, they are denied proper wages, the basic amenities and the major reason for all their struggles is to live in a home of one's own. It has been a fantasy for all these workers to fulfil at least their dreams of possessing a home or educating their children or having proper food. All the hope of these workers gets shattered as they are compelled to doubt the existence of their occupation. The later half of the twentieth century has witnessed a large number of these middle-class workers entering into the crowded cities without any proper assurance of employment or proper wages. There is no assurance of the medical allowances which is to be provided, no guarantee for the human rights and the notably horrible condition of the females. In a society which has been completely built on vengeance and selfishness, the society tends to fail in its distribution of rights equally.

Besides, the character delineation is genuine with equal importance being attributed to each one irrespective of the sex. The attempts of the workers who are responsible for the construction of huge buildings are kept hidden deep down the earth. Neither their work nor their sacrifice is spoken of. Similarly, man without woman is nothing has been extensively proved.

Adhilakshmi is the central key to the novel who is discussed about much; her courage, hard work, perseverance in spite of her declining health, her attempts in getting her elder daughter Kanniyamma married, her efforts to regain the responsibility in her son by getting him married to Rahini, a girl who has been educated up to tenth standard with the hope of changing her son are the common dreams in the life of poor but innocent people. Adhilakshmi is the representative of numerous poor yet contented lives of the present-day world. Though constraints make her naive, she manages to nurture her daughters Kanniyamma, Kauveri and her son Kaasi. She desires that her son should not work in the field of construction as she has seen her husband losing his life during a construction. Adhilakshmi does not have big dreams; she just dreams to put her son in any safe job other than construction.



The way she yells with tears after coming to know that her elder daughter Kanniyamma has been forcibly sent out obliging to the necessity to accommodate the custom of not allowing two pregnant ladies to look at each other is moving. The arrival of Kanniyamma's sister-in-law becomes the reason for her being locked inside for days together which infuriates Adhilakshmi. Another shock that disturbs her is the fact that Kanniyamma has been living with her husband infected with a disease – a secret which has not yet been revealed to her.

The narration gets deeper when she arranges a go between her son and her son-in-law and treats him medically. She is portrayed as a symbol of strength, gathering all her energy, in tying the knot between her son Kaasi and Rahini.

The character of Kaasi is an illustration of bildungsroman, progressing from a man of no sincerity to a person of responsibility, with the consequent bullying attitude of Rahini instructing him to take up the responsibility at least to earn for their living. A girl of good sense, she becomes the backbone assisting Kaasi in his positive transformation. The younger sibling, Kauveri, serves to be the modern girl of bravery who dares to face any situation. At times, she is seen as an embodiment of vigour through the words of Suseela, a research scholar who has actually come there to record the problems and the condition of the construction workers. In due course of time, she becomes one among them not restricting her visit for her research work alone but starts enlightening them about their rights for a healthy compromising living. It is through Suseela that Kauveri becomes a woman of knowledge and courage.

Suseela is penned as a right teacher appropriately enlightening the construction workers about their rights in the workplace, cleanliness, responsibility of every citizen to safeguard themselves and the people and the place in which they dwell. She further becomes the symbol of wisdom to create a tremendous change in the mind of the construction workers.

Rahini and Kaasi serving under RRM happen to witness the cunning and cruel attitude of rich people who possess another side which is too dirty, attempting to destroy people and squeeze their blood relentlessly. Several incidents happen to show the intensity of the merciless mentality of the masters who do not bother about the emotions, feelings or the life of the workers who are also humans. On the other hand, RRM serves to be the negative side of the society which dehumanises the workers. An event clearly illustrates the other face of RRM, when a girl's finger is being cut in the construction site. The merciless RRM does not even bother about the pain of the girl and is rather worried about the work being left incomplete. The pregnant ladies, such as Kanniyamma, do not get frequent intervals and are treated poorly without any response. RRM fails to feed or rescue them properly and becomes red faced when he sees workers helping each other during times of emergency.

Such an aristocratic cruelty is always seen with most of the upper-class owners in almost all the construction sites. Every time Rahini and Kaasi encounter RRM, he impresses them with sugar coated words, yet with a venomous thought lying deep inside him. The way he shouts at the workers

for standing with Kamsalai when she becomes imbalanced due to paralysis. Instead of helping them, he shouts at them, “Why do you do this? Are you not working properly? Do you want me to stop the work and send you home?” (147). As soon as the reaction of the workers changes, he compromises, “What do you want me to do?” (148).

The final section reveals the efforts of Suseela in persuading all the construction workers to form a committee, due to whose words all the workers join together not only to meet their personal needs but also to work as a team for a better future. The novel thus ends with a positive note as Sankaran, one of the co-workers, comes in holding the new born child of widowed Kanniyamma with Kauveri, Suseela, Kaasi and Adhilakshmi watching them happily.

Both Kavignar Vairamuthu and Thilagavathy bring together the simple lives of the poor, innocent, neglected sections of the society and how they toil to live in this democratic world without proper rights. The narrators of both the novels *Kallikaatu Ithigasam* and *Kalmaram* explicitly voice the neglected sections of the society, who long to possess an identity, a quiet and happy life. The narrative memory of the writers involves a fragmented reproduction of events, implying a tumultuous turn with the mingling of the past and the present events. It also traces the path of the ancestors and compares it with the present society, brings out the negative side of the contemporary world. Both the writers attempt to portray the social evils and try to underline the life of common man with the narrative memory recreating the stories.

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