

Victim as well as Victor: A Comparative Analysis of Nandini from Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan* and Cleopatra from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*

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Abstract:

The aim of the paper is to make a comparative analysis of two immortal characters, Nandini, from Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan* and Cleopatra, from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Both the characters stand apart from other literary characters through their magnificence. Nandini is victimized by the Chozha princess Kundavai in her early age which makes her fall in the hands of Pandya conspirators and she later marries an old man, Pazhuvettarayar, the king of Pazhuvur. She later avenges the Chozha kingdom by killing the Chozha crown prince. Like Nandini, Cleopatra is also a victim of the masculine pride, but she conquers it through her wit. In both the literary pieces the major action revolves around these two female characters. Transforming from the state of victim to the state of victor makes both the characters look magnificent. Their success lies in controlling and conquering the masculine pride.

Keywords: victim, victor, conspirators, masculine, magnificent, Nandini, Cleopatra

“Was this the face that launched a thousand ships, / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?” asks Christopher Marlowe in his *Doctor Faustus*. Marlowe's statement is related to Helen of Troy, for whom the great Trojan War was fought. Helen's fairness immortalized her in two ways. It made her world's finest beauty which is recorded in Homer's *Iliad*, but it also led to many disputes. The trap set behind such women makes the beauty poisonous. Like Helen, history also recorded another woman whose fairness attracted many kings. Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt is also an immortalized character. Her grandeur is recorded by Shakespeare in his play *Antony and Cleopatra*. Apart from these two characters there comes the third, combining the characteristics of the former two. Kalki in his *Ponniyin Selvan* introduces Nandini, a fictional

character who is as beautiful as Helen, as grand as Cleopatra and as powerful as a mighty warrior. Like Cleopatra her power also lies in her beauty.

Nandini as well as Cleopatra are from two different geographical locations, cultural backgrounds and political systems. It is the comparative literature that makes both the characters come together in spite of their diversified background. Wikipedia defines comparative literature as, “Comparative literature is an academic field dealing with the study of literature and cultural expression across linguistic, national, and disciplinary boundaries. Comparative literature “performs a role similar to that of the study of international relations, but works with languages and artistic traditions, so as to understand cultures ‘from the inside’”... comparative literature is an interdisciplinary field whose practitioners study literature across national borders, across time periods, across languages, across genres, across boundaries between literature and the other arts...”. Comparative literature further gives the researcher the freedom to compare the characters from different literary texts irrespective of their background. It is the comparative literature that brought Kalki and Shakespeare to the same table.

The beauty of Nandini as well as Cleopatra can be compared in the first place. Kalki and Shakespeare show their artistic talent while describing these two characters. Cleopatra is a historically proven beauty whereas Nandini is a fictional beauty. Both the characters attract many men in their lives and also become the victim of male gaze. It is the grandeur of Cleopatra that attracts many people. Through the mouth of Enobarbus, Shakespeare says,

Enobarbus: Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale

Her infinite variety; other women cloy

The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry

Where most she satisfies; for vilest things

Become themselves in her, that the holy priests

Bless her when she is riggish. (239-245, Act II, Scene II)

The same kind of description can be seen in *Ponniyin Selvan*, when Kalki describes Nandini. Kalki uses much imagery to describe Nandini. He compares the beauty of Nandini and the Chozha princess Kundavai. He says,

Nandini was golden-hued in complexion; Kundavai’s colouring was that of the red lotus. Nandini’s face was round like the full moon... Nandini’s long dark eyes were like the outspread wings of a golden bee,... Nandini’s nose was a bit flat and as smooth as

ivory... Nandini's full lips seemed like a coral cup, overflowing with honey... Nandini wore her hair in a kondai, decorated with an elaborate floral arrangement.

The beauty of both Cleopatra and Nandi bring them together. Both of them used their beauty in the same way, Cleopatra, to protect her country and Nandini, to achieve her aim. (P 81)

It is the ability to fight against the masculine pride gets the important place, when Nandini and Cleopatra are compared. On the one hand Nandini enters the Chozha kingdom as a lone woman in the disguise of Ilayarani of Pazhuvur and threatens the entire Chozha family. Her beauty mutes the men, including her husband Pazhuvettarayar raising voice against her. In addition to that her charm intoxicates and blinds the people who stand before her. Because of that people are afraid to come before her. Nandini too agrees this:

... For some reason everyone is afraid of me. Peria Pazhuvettarayar, that warrior of warriors who bears sixty-four wounds from many battles, is afraid of me. Chinna Pazhuvettarayar, Kalanthaka Kandar, who can terrify Yama himself, trembles with fear when he comes to me. Maduranthakar, who desires to be the Emperor of the Chozhas, approaches me with deep reverence. Even the Emperor, Sundara Chozhar, who is now peering into Yama's world, shivers when I go to him. Sometimes he even faints when he sees me! As for Parthibendra Pallavan, who arrived here today, I've heard about his bravery.... But within half nazhigai of coming to me, he's grown so docile and submissive that he's forgotten about going to Aditha Karikalar and follows me around instead. (P 101, Vol. II)

Nandini's actions resemble that of Cleopatra. It is the charm and love of Cleopatra that makes Antony forget Rome and stay in Alexandria. The difference is that Pazhuvettarayar is unaware of the harm that Nandini's presence is making whereas Antony is fully aware of his duties and his inability to move away from Cleopatra. He says, "I must from this enchanting queen break off;/ Ten thousand harms, more than the ills I know,/ My idleness doth hatch". Both the characters try to brain fade their partners. Cleopatra tries her best to control Antony. She does not want Antony to go to Rome. If he goes, he may forget her. It is her longing for a companion that makes her preventing Antony's trip to Rome. In order to get his attention she sends her messenger to interfere his meeting with Enobarbus. She orders her messenger,

Cleopatra. See where he is, who's with him, what he does;

I did not send you; if you find his sad,

Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report

That I am sudden sick; quick, and return (line 9, Act I, Scene III)

Cleopatra needs Antony as a lover, a companion, a brave warrior in whose presence other countries will not disturb Egypt. In the same way Nandini needs Pazhuvettarayar as a companion to safeguard her, a scapegoat with whose power she can help the Pandya conspirators and achieve her mission of destroying the Chozha kingdom.

On the one hand both the female characters look dependent, but on the other hand they fooled their partners. Both Pazhuvettarayar and Antony lost their respect because of Nandini and Cleopatra. It is evident from the opening lines of *Antony and Cleopatra*, that Antony starts to lose his power because of Cleopatra.

Philo. Nay, but this dotage of our general's

O'erflows the measure; those his goodly eyes,
That o'er the files and musters of the war
Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn
The office and devotion of their view
Upon a tawny front; his captain's heart,
Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper,
And is become the bellows and the fan
To cool a gipsy's lust (Lines 1-10, Act I, Scene I)

Antony's fame is faded by his relationship with Cleopatra. In the same way, Pazhuvettarayar's fame is dimmed by his partner Nandini. He is even warned by his younger brother Kalanthaka Kanda who is well aware of the intentions of Nandini. He says,

"... I'll tell you something I've been wanting to say for a long time. You're rearing a poisonous cobra, because it is beautiful. One day, it's going to strike and it will destroy all of us. You really don't need her here. Please drive her out, before you do anything else." (P 199, Vol. I)

In spite of several warnings given by his brother, Pazhuvettarayar keeps Nandini with him, rejecting the advice of everyone. Later he feels for his action when she realizes that, it is Nandini who helped the Pandya conspirators to kill Aditha Karikalan.

Nandini and Cleopatra show their power by controlling their partners. When everyone is talking ill of them, they wittily conquer the minds of their beloveds and make them reject the warnings of others. This happens in both the texts. When Pazhuvettarayar gets some doubts immediately Nandini realizes that and attracts him with her charm. It further befools him. In one place he wants to scold her. Within few actions he is captured by the beauty of Nandini.

... all for the sake of a girl I brought back from the jungle? Why was she so special? We know nothing of her past. Sometimes, the way she behaves and talks does give room for suspicion.... He wanted to scold her, but he began to try instead to appease her anger. "Nandini! My Kanmani, pearl of my eye! Why this anger, this indifference?" (PP 200, 202, Vol. I)

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony is warned by his well-wishers about the interference of Cleopatra into politics, but Antony, though aware of Cleopatra is not able to avoid her. It shows the impact created by Cleopatra in his mind. It is because of Cleopatra and her failed plans that Antony loses all his battles at the end. He scolds Cleopatra vehemently in some places, but immediately changes his idea once she consoles him. He says,

Anotny. I found you as a morsel, cold upon
Dead Caesar's trencher; nay, you were a fragment
Of Cneius Pompey's; besides wht hotter hours,
Unregister'd in vulgar fame, you have
Luxuriously pick'd out; for I am sure,
Through you can guess what temperance should be,
You know not what it is. (Line 115-121, Act III, Scene VI)

The main difference between Nandini and Cleopatra is that Nandini is a wife of Pazhuvettarayar and Cleopatra is the mistress of Antony. The relationship between Cleopatra and Antony is not legal, but both Nandini as well as Cleopatra are treated equally by people. They faced the male gaze equally.

Both Nandini as well as Cleopatra are victims of masculinity. Nandini is even betrayed by the hierarchy which separates her from her childhood lover Aditha Karikalan. It is the same masculinity which beheaded her father Veera Pandiyan. She becomes the victim of the fight between two masculine forces. Personally she has no vengeance for Aditha Karikalan, but after

the beheading of Veera Pandiyan, the Pandya conspirators considered that, it is Nandini who betrayed their king and they try to burn her, but she assures them that she will avenge the death of their king by helping them destroy the Chozha kingdom. This shows how a female is forced to take the role of a conspirator and it is her beauty that helps her in this place. She captures the eyes of Pazhuvettarayar and enters the Pazhuvur palace as his Ilayarani. There she helps the Pandya conspirators, directly and indirectly. Finally she triumphs by killing Aditha Karikalan. In this way, from the place of a victim, she becomes a victor. The paradox is that, even after succeeding in her aim, she is still a victim of masculine pride. As said by Simon de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex*, “In a sense her whole existence is waiting, since she is confined in the limbo of immanence and contigence, and since her justification is always in the hands of others.”

Nandini, in this novel is only an eighteen year old girl, but she is forced to marry sixty four year old Pazhuvettarayar. Though she says that she loves him, and married him willingly, she is mocked by people in many places. Aditha Karikalan calls him ‘Pazhuvur paati’. The male gaze disturbs her throughout the novel. For the Pandya conspirators she is an important leader and they respect her very much, but in the Chozha kingdom she is considered as a poisonous snake. The same scenario can be seen in *Antony and Cleopatra*, where the Egyptians praise Cleopatra very much, but the people in Rome mock at her. This shows the real side of the female leaders. One group of people praise them and another group of people talks ill of them. On the one hand they are victors and on the other hand, they are completely victims.

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