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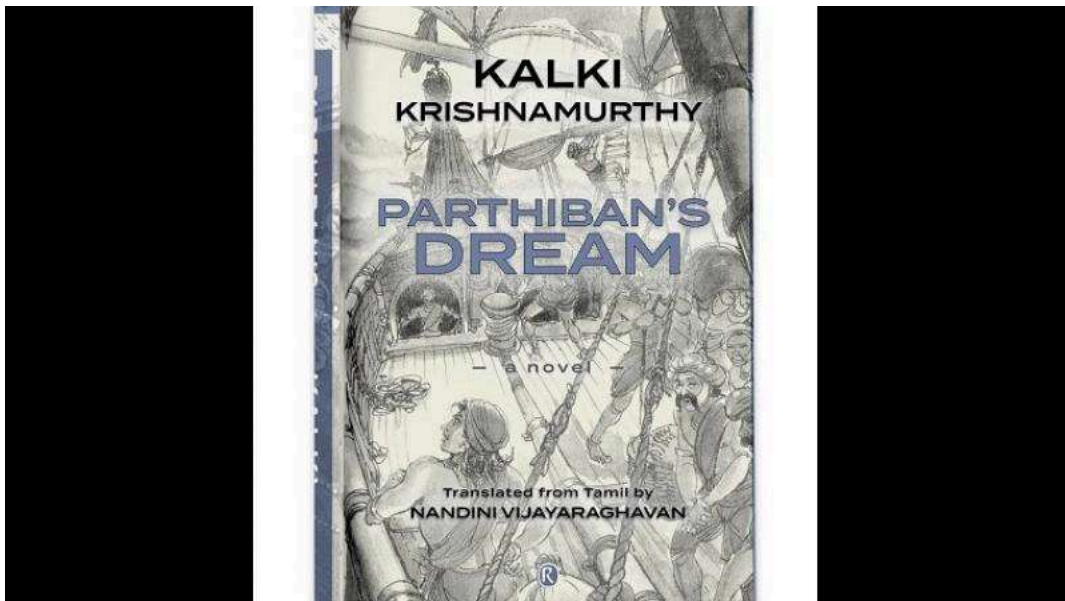
Book Review | When Parthiban Kanavu morphs into Parthibanâ€™s Dream

Lifestyle

 [Suresh Subrahmanyam](#)

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No credit was given to the translators in the initial English renditions, an omission which was corrected in subsequent versions



Parthiban's Dream By Kalki Krishnamurthy.



Georges Simenon, the French author of the much-loved Detective Maigret series, prolifically wrote 75 Maigret novels between 1931 and 1972. The original version was in French, and achieved worldwide fame after the English translations came out. No credit was given to the translators in the initial English renditions, an omission which was corrected in subsequent versions. The brilliant Dorothy L. Sayers was best known for her erudite, detective fictional novels featuring

Lord Peter Wimsey as her aristocratic sleuth. Less known is the fact that she translated Dante's narrative poem, Divine Comedy, considered by literary experts to be among her finest efforts. Those who have read the English translations of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus, Proust, Sartre and many other legendary non-English writers may not have the faintest clue as to who translated these great authors. We remember Metamorphosis as Kafka's allegorical masterpiece, Camus' The Outsider as a brooding contemplation of alienation and Crime and Punishment as Dostoevsky's definitive study of the moral dilemma. The superb English translators of these novels are featured in small print, their unique skill, by design, is "born to blush unseen".

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Who is the French author known for the Detective Maigret series?

☐ Dorothy L. Sayers

☐ Dante

☐ Kalki Krishnamurthy

☐ Georges Simenon

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In polyglot India, English translations of great literary works may be considered, with respect to output and quality, a work in progress. In that context, the recent release of the English translation of Kalki Krishnamurthy's much-admired novel, Parthiban Kanavu (Parthiban's Dream — Ratna Books, Rs.599), is a welcome addition. First of the author's trilogy of great Tamil novels in the historical genre, Parthiban Kanavu was followed by the equally popular Sivkamiyin Sabadham and Ponniyin Selvan — all released between 1943 and 1954. This is in addition to the several social-themed novels that Kalki Krishnamurthy wrote during that period. Such was the enormous popularity of this writer that the Government of India even released a postage stamp in his honour in 1999.

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In taking up the onerous task of translating Parthiban Kanavu into English (there have been other earlier efforts as well), Nandini Vijayaraghavan would have faced numerous challenges. Her previous translation of Kanavu's prequel, Ponniyin Selvan, would have held her in good stead. Local idioms, unique expressions and aphorisms in narrative and conversational Tamil would have been extremely challenging to render in a foreign tongue, even in one as familiar to us as English. As cultural commentator Seetha Ravi says on the jacket cover, "A translator's task is often thankless and punishingly hard." Particularly to those who may already be familiar with the original version in the vernacular. Critics would carp in the same way they do when famous books are rendered into film. With a few exceptions, people tend to revert to the tired cliché, "I think the book was much better." So with translations.

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The good thing about translating a Tamil masterpiece like Parthiban Kanavu into English is that, by definition it is primarily meant for those who are not familiar with Tamil. From that point of view Nandini Vijayaraghavan has done an admirable job. Though the English version is long, coming in at just under 400 pages, the narrative is lucid and easily followed even by those who have no knowledge of the original. The backdrop of the storyline, involving a longstanding rivalry between the Pallava and Chola dynasties, embedded with a romantic sub-plot featuring the primary male and female protagonists of the rival clans, the conflicts, the court intrigues, the ironies and the surprising denouement, are all well captured.

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In order to gain a better understanding of the book, this reviewer was fortunate to come upon the Tamil film version of Parthiban Kanavu on YouTube. Produced in 1960, the black and white feature boasts an impressive cast with Gemini Ganesan and Vyjayantimala in the main roles, Vikraman and Kundavai, respectively. At a viewing length of three-and-a-half hours, one had to watch the film in its entirety in three or four episodic instalments. As my mandate here is not to review the film but the translation of the book, I could sum up by saying that clearly, Vijayaraghavan's effort surpasses anything that the linear, and somewhat simplistic, narrative of the film could convey. In passing, one should mention that a cultural interlude provided in the film with an extended dance sequence by Kamala Laxman with the peerless M.L Vasanthakumari on background vocals, provided a fine testament to the refinement of the classical arts through Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music.

An important element that enhances the English Parthiban's Dream, is the evocative monochromatic illustrations in the book from one of Tamil Nadu's most respected artists from a bygone era, Gopulu, who was a household name as an illustrator and cartoonist, particularly for his contributions to the hugely popular Tamil weekly, Ananda Vikatan. The drawings are redolent of the period being written about, inducing an inescapable whiff of nostalgia.

In sum, reviewing a translation of an original literary work can often be tricky. One has to tiptoe along a fine line between showering encomiums on the original masterpiece, as against critiquing the English translation, which is the prime purpose of this review. Being mindful of that trap, one can say with conviction that Parthiban's Dream may fall a tad short for those who have devoured Kalki Krishnamurthy's Parthiban Kanavu, but for those who take up Vijayaraghavan's English rendition as a first-time read, they should find the experience fulfilling. As this reviewer did.

Suresh Subrahmanyam is a retired advertising and brand communications professional. He is also a columnist.

Parthiban's Dream

By Kalki Krishnamurthy

Translated by Nandini Vijayaraghavan

Ratna Books

pp. 400, Rs.599



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Suresh Subrahmanyam

The author is a brand consultant with an interest in music, cricket, humour and satire

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