

The test of time

Updated - December 19, 2016 01:54 pm IST

Kalki's historical novels deserve to be called classics, as they continue to be popular years after they were first written, says Ashokamitran.

ASHOKAMITRAN.

PRINT

Some years ago, a professor of English in south India got around to organising a four-day seminar titled "On Creating a Modern Classic". Everything went well till the third day when a professor of English from Singapore declared the title was absurd. How could a work be a classic before it is created? Even more absurd was the term 'modern classic'. To be called a classic, a work has to be time-tested, and should be at least 100 years old. He shattered the composure of all the participants who had read papers earlier and those who were about to.

There are hundreds of examples of works being extremely popular soon after they were published but being forgotten in less than 10 years. In 10 years, Erle Stanley Gardner wrote so many books that the resultant pillar, when the books were stacked, was taller than the tall writer. Harold Robbins, Jacqueline Susan, Arthur Hailey, Irving Wallace and Mario Puzo were once read by all 'up-to-date' men. Now, even shop assistants may not be sure if there were authors by those names. Maybe Mario Puzo is an exception. Because Marlon Brando is still remembered.

In 1941, it would have been impossible to think of the popular Tamil weekly, *Ananda Vikatan*, without writer Kalki and vice versa. Both Kalki and S.S. Vasani, the proprietor of *Vikatan*, were nationalists and expert communicators but differed in certain matters about making the readership grow. But their parting of ways occurred due to the manner Kalki, the executive editor, reported that he would be unavailable for an unspecified period because he was offering *satyagraha*. Even then, Vasani asked why he hadn't informed earlier. Kalki's reply was that there were editorial staff who could manage the magazine in his absence. Vasani said, "Then you better resign and go."

Kalki started a magazine in his own name soon after his release from the prison. He then began a lifelong project of writing historical novels. Though it is said he had *Sivakamiyin Sabatham* in mind for 12 years, it would have been an afterthought while his first historical novel, *Parthiban Kanavu*, was progressing successfully. *Sivakamiyin Sabatham* began on New Year's Day of 1944 and concluded in 1946. His earlier historical had three parts, *Sabatham* had four. The

denouement was, in many ways, like that of Alexandre Dumas, but Kalki added classical dance, sculpture, medieval devotional poetry to embellish his story of a prince falling in love with a dance-adept commoner.

Since its publication, the novel has been serialised again and again in *Kalki* and as a book in a number of editions. Kalki's four historical romances have been popular successes and it is surprising that, in 2012, it occurs to two young translators to render *Sivakamiyin Sabatham* in English. Pavitra Srinivasan had a release function for the first of the four parts, but Nandini Vijayaraghavan has got all four parts translated and published. One can't find fault with either, but Nandini's volumes are better edited.

The majority of Indians don't know much about the history of south India and these translations should evoke curiosity about it. On reading Karthik Narayanan's five-volume translation of *Ponniyin Selvan*, another of Kalki's historical novels, Aravind Adiga said that he felt comfortable about the rich heritage of Tamil Nadu.

Sivakamiyin Sabatham is a fictional account of two great emperors of the South. Both the Pallavas of Kanchi and the Chalukyas of Vatapi (now Badami) were great builders and have left behind extraordinary rock sculptures. *Sivakamiyin Sabatham* is a tribute to our past. It may not be a modern 'classic', but is certainly a time-tested popular classic!

Published - October 06, 2013 12:00 am IST

[READ COMMENTS](#)

[PRINT](#)

Top News Today

INDIA

India refutes The New York Times' allegations on re-routing sensitive equipment; defends HAL's record

The Centre defends Hindustan Aeronautics Limited record on maintaining all "international obligations on strategic trade controls and end-user commitments"

THE HINDU BUREAU