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Ponniyin Selvan 1: Mani Ratnam Handles a Complex Plot with Motley Group of Characters

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Chennai, India



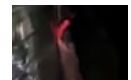
Have Mani Ratnam and his co-writer, Elango Kumaravel, been able to simplify the plot for those who may have never read the novel?

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Ponniyin Selvan 1 has been adapted from the book which was enormously popular largely because it evoked Tamil sentiment about a great dynasty.

Ponniyin Selvan is a fictional novel, inspired by the history of the Chola Dynasty which ruled southern [India](#) in the mid-900 AD. Written by Kalki Krishnamurthy, who serialised the story in his Tamil highly-regarded magazine, Kalki, from October 1950 to May 1954, it was released as a five-volume book in 1955. At 2210 pages, with a huge number of characters, Ponniyin Selvan (also translated into other languages, including English) was a lucid piece of work penned with precision. It was enormously popular largely because it evoked Tamil sentiment about a great dynasty whose rule saw the rise of literary excellence and architectural grandeur.

Not an easy task to have adapted the mammoth and masterly novel to the screen, which Mani Ratnam has, and especially so because the plot is highly complex with a motley group of characters whose names are virtual tongue twisters. Ratnam himself had attempted to film it earlier; so did M. G. Ramachandran, the late Tamil Nadu Chief Minister. There were others, including Kamal Haasan.

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But like so many adaptations, there is always a sense of disappointment when one watches a novel on screen, and the comparisons while being inevitable are, unfair. They are two different mediums. Recently, we watched Persuasion, Jane Austen's most compelling novel published after her death. Many Austen fans felt betrayed. Likewise, there could be many who would feel a sense of deep dissatisfaction after watching Ponniyin Selvan 1.

(But how many have read the book?)

The moot point here is, has Ratnam and his co-writer, Elango Kumaravel, been able to simplify the plot for those who may have never read the novel. Or, were the duo able to strike a balance between the movie and the novel? Were they able to elevate the cinematic version into something higher than the prose? The answer is, sadly, no. Young audiences around me were perplexed with the narrative, and kept asking one another who was who, and their relationships to one another.

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The movie narrated in chaste Tamil (long forgotten in Tamil cinema) did not make matters easy, and the script seemed so convoluted that Ratnam's work was a like a jigsaw puzzle, and the pieces appeared to be floating, hard to pin down. And it took 90 minutes – out of the long run time of 167 minutes with songs and dances that merely weighed the story down further – to get some kind of grasp over the historical tale. The computer graphics – especially of the couple of battle scenes could have been far better – and Chennai is well known for turning out some superb stuff here.

Let me now come to story, which is laced with intrigue, treachery, betrayals and disappointments. Emperor Sundara Chola (a very refreshingly different Prakash Raj, and his enormous talent is so often wasted) is very sick and he wants his eldest son, Aditha Karikalan (a superb Vikram), to succeed. Sundara Chola also has another son, Arunmozhi Varman (Jayam Ravi) and daughter Kundavi (Trisha, whose performance surpasses Aishwarya Rai's as Nandhini, a Pazhuvoor queen and once Karikalan's lover). Probably, Nayanthara would have done far better justice to this character, who is many layered.

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Mani Ratnam Make Ponniyin Kamal Haasan

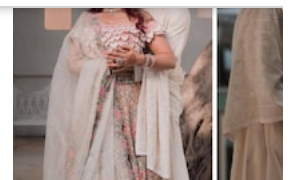
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Where does Karthi fit into all this? He plays Vallavaraiyan Vanthiyathevan, a warrior prince of the Vaanar clan and friend of Karikalan, also one who Kundavi secretly admires. Karthi has an interesting role as some sort of "sutradar", whose adventurous spirit, sarcasm and bravery (though he is mortified of water), infuse a breath of fresh air into an otherwise wordy and heavily archaic story-telling.

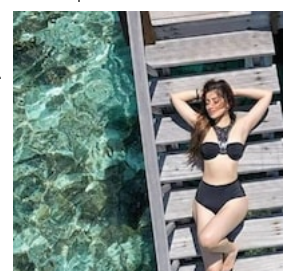
This film is only part one, with the second to follow next year. Will Ratnam be able to garner the kind of hype he did with part one? He is best at intimate plots; after all who can forget his brilliant Nayakan (never mind it was inspired by Godfather) or his touching romance, Alaipayuthey. I even liked his Bombay with its unforgettable songs. AR Rahman was melodiously magnificent there, but in Ponniyin Selvan, I could not find a single number that moved me. To top it all, the music was often intrusive adding to the struggle to wade through a work that was downright confusing.

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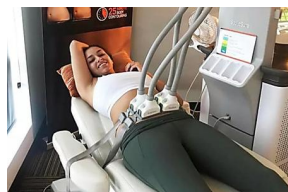
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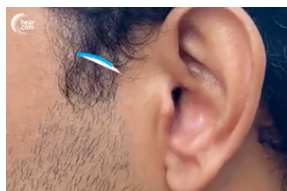


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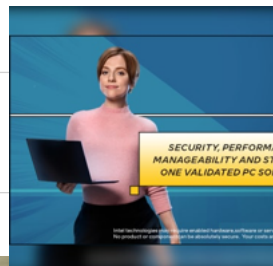
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