Chapter 3

TOWARDS THE MARKET: THE RISE OF THE NOVEL

In this age, when printing machines have become legion and the business in paper has expanded, novels have started to proliferate like termites . . . The Tamil people who know not the true novel are gobbling up this trash like fowls eating termites.

*Panchamirtam* 1(7), October 1924.

In the first two chapters we found that Tamil publishing, after half a century of being sustained by patronage, began to move towards the market and the people in the first decades of the twentieth century. We saw, through studies of Subramaniya Bharati and M.V. Ramanujachari, that the transition from patronage to the public was a traumatic one, especially for literary producers. It was only with the rise to pre-eminence of the novel that Tamil publishing decisively moved to the public for its sustenance. This argument is set forth in this chapter by first stating briefly the popularity of the novel in the inter-war period. This is followed by the debates surrounding the novel and its final rise to respectability by the late 1930s. The chapter concludes with some remarks on the link between the rise of the novel and Tamil publishing.

3.1 The Popularity of Tamil Fiction

A surfeit of novels deluged Tamil society in the mid-1910s. The number of advertisements in contemporary journals is only the most obvious indicator of the extent of this phenomenon.
Periodicals like *Ananda Bodhini*, *Amirtaguna Bodhini*, *Viveka Bodhini* and *Lakshmi* abound in these advertisements. Scores of novels are listed in them and their very titles are suggestive of the content: *Venkala Chilai Allathu Kanniyin Mutham* (The Bronze Statue or the Virgin’s Kiss); *Kanakangi allathu Kalugumalai Kallan* (Kanakangi or the Dacoit of Kalugumalai); *Ponnuswamy Thevar Kolai* (The Murder of Ponnuswamy Thevar); *Ratnapuri Ragasiyam* (The Mystery of Ratnapuri); *Pachai Mothirathin Marmam* (The Mystery of the Emerald Ring), etc. Most of these novels flaunted the sub-title ‘a detective story’: a signpost for the new reader. The advertisements also emphasized the suspense, thrill and titillation that were in store for the readers.

Every periodical worth the name published novels in serial form during this period. *Ananda Bodhini* and *Vivekodhayam*, even in their first editorials stated that novels would be published in serial form in their issues.¹ *Ananda Bodhini*’s sister publication, *Manamohini* published only novels.² *Naveenagam* (‘The Novel’) was another monthly meant exclusively for serializing novels.³ J.R. Rangaraju (1875-1959), Arani Kuppuswamy Mudaliar (1867-1925) and Vaduvoor Duraiswamy Iyengar (1880-1942) were acknowledged masters of this variety of fiction: ‘Arani’ and ‘Vaduvoor’, eventually became shorthands for popular fiction. These writers were later joined by the women-novelist Vai. Mu. Kothainayaki Ammal (1901-1956) with her sentimental sob-stories and S.S.

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¹ *Ananda Bodhini*, July 1915; *Vivekodhayam*, 1916.
² See advertisement in *Ananda Bodhini*, April 1934.
³ See advertisement in *Lakshmi*, August 1924.
Arunagirinathar (1895-1974). Their novels were extremely popular and went into numerous reprints. For instance, J.R. Rangaraju's Rajambal saw 23 editions by 1928, and as a contemporary journal observed, this had been achieved "without advertisements, high discounts or [remaindering at] half-rates at the Srirangam fair". By about the same time, Rangaraju's Chandrakanta had seen 13 editions, Mohanasundaram 12, Anantakrishnan 10 and Rajendran 9 editions.

While the remarkable growth of the Tamil novel is too obvious to be missed, we do not have sufficient data to quantify this phenomenon. The Annual Review and Analysis of books registered, prepared by the Registrar of Books, unfortunately, do not give a language-wise split. However, Table 3.1 has been constructed from the Classified Catalogue of Books Registered at the office of the Registrar of Books. A caveat is in order here as the colonial administrative machinery to police the book was notoriously weak (see Chapter 6), and the figures pertain only to the books actually registered. There is no way to ascertain the number of books which escaped the attention of the Registrar. Further, 'Fiction', the head under which novels were classified, included a wide range of moral tales and fables like the stories of Alauddin, Alibaba, Panchatantra and Vikiramaditya, apart from taking into account reprints also.

4 Review of Rajambal in Amirtaguna Bodhini, 15 August 1928.
5 See advertisement in Rangaraju, Mohanasundaram (12th edition), Madras, 1927.
### Table 3.1 Tamil Fictional Works, 1890-1925

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>No. of Fictional Works</th>
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<tr>
<td>1890-1900</td>
<td>39</td>
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<tr>
<td>1901-1910</td>
<td>201</td>
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<td>1911-1915</td>
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<td>1916-1920</td>
<td>244</td>
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<td>1921-1925</td>
<td>255</td>
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As the table shows, while only 39 and 201 fictional works were published in the last decade of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth centuries respectively, there was a quantum leap in the subsequent quinquennial periods. Even the Registrar of Books, not the most perceptive of observers, was forced to comment on "the large increase under Fiction (in the vernacular languages)". 6 In fact, novels were so popular that the District Magistrate of Tiruchy, surveying the sort of reading materials available to people in the Swadeshi period, found no less than 114 Tamil novels in a reading room in the small time town of Lalgudi. 7

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6 Annual Review and Analysis of books registered during 1913, G.O. No. 558-9, Educational, Confidential, 14 May 1914.
7 G.O.No. 363, Educational, Confidential, 10 June 1911.
This growth was indeed phenomenal by the standards of Tamil publishing in the age of patronage and during the transition, when literary producers struggled hard not only to acquire patronage to meet expenses but also to find sufficient number of readers for their books (Chapters 1 and 2).

More importantly, the novel was becoming the art form par excellence of the rising middle class, and it was due to this middle class that Tamil publishing decisively broke away from patronage and made inroads into the market, in the process making the Tamil book a commodity. But the Tamil middle class, much like the English working class, was not born at an appointed time, but was present in its own making. The Tamil middle class attempted to gain a consciousness of a class-for-itself, inter alia, through a series of ideological struggles against the novel in its popular manifestation. Therefore it is crucial to elaborate on and understand these struggles especially because it had hegemonic aspirations. (We shall have occasion to talk of the Tamil middle class and its hegemonic project in the later part of this study. See, especially, 5.6 and 7.3.) In these debates, a whole range of issues, from the content and print run of books to the social composition of readers and their reading practices, not to speak of the construction of a canon of

8 See K. Kailasapathy's excellent study on the rise of the Tamil novel, Tamil Novel Ilakkiyam, Madras, 1987 (1 ed. 1968), esp. pp. 25-37 & 203-5. He argues that the birth of the Tamil novel is directly linked to the emergence of the middle class. Drawing attention to the middle-class background of the novelists, he demonstrates how the novels reflect the travails of their class. For Kailasapathy, the emergence of the short story in the early 1930s is explained by the maturing of the Tamil middle class.


modern classics, came in for deliberation of middle-class intellectuals, which was largely to determine the course of mainstream Tamil publishing during the century. Hence we take a look at the debates surrounding the novel to gain a better understanding of the Tamil publishing world.

3.2 The Critique of Popular Fiction

The spate of popular novels that deluged Tamil society did not go unnoticed. It was widely commented upon by a number of perceptive intellectuals of the rising middle-class. The following formula delineated by a writer in Suthanthira Sangu to write a popular novel, aptly sums up the nature of the popular novels as the critics saw them.

1. The title should be that of a woman. There should be some novelty in the name. 'Miss Leela Kamini', 'Fashionable Vallibhai' - titles should be of this sort.

2. Don't worry about the story. You can adapt the novels of Reynolds or Le Quex. There should be at least one dozen lovers, half a dozen whores, ten dozen thieves and a few detectives.

3. For a start there should be a murder. At frequent intervals there should be interesting turning points. There should also be a conflagration at some point. These are the characteristics of the modern novel.

4. There is money only if there is titillation. Beware, if you write like Madhaviah or Rajam Aiyar, your book won't sell.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11} Suthanthira Sangu, 8 July 1933.
There is much differentiation among the middle-class intellectuals who critiqued the popular novels. But they all held the above characterization of these novels.

The Saivite intellectuals and champions of the Tamil ‘renaissance’ were some of the first to raise their voice against the rise of popular fiction. Thiru. Vi. Kaliyanasundara Mudaliar claimed to have never read novels in his life after Rev. G.G. Fox, the principal of the Wesleyan College where he studied, warned him of their dubious moral effects. It is hardly surprising that Thiru. Vi. Ka., with his near-puritan beliefs, despised novels. His criticism of novels was that they were concerned very much with the exterior of human life and did not dwell deep into the hearts of men. "Can (novels) open the inner recesses of the heart? Can they nurture morality? Profundity of thought is required for the flowering of the inner heart and the attainment of morality. Can these lowly novels induce profound thinking?" he queried, and dubbed all novels as trash.\(^{12}\) When it came to women reading novels he was even more strident in his criticism, an issue we will consider in detail in 3.3.

Maraimalai Adigal held similar views, though he too tried his hand at the novel. In an English preface to his novel, he wrote:

... In most of the Tamil novels that I have come across, I find neither plot nor character delineation, neither a true representation of life nor a chaste and felicitous diction of language. The story chiefly turns only upon love pas-

sion - the love in its most degraded type and grossly earthy form ... in all the Tamil novels published in a decade or two the diction is rendered unwholesome by the introduction of unassimilated foreign words ... and by the unhappy combination of words and phrases. .. 13

Kumaran, the journal run by S. Murugappa who was a staunch Saivite in the 1920s but later moved over to the Self-respect movement under Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy, too, was carping in its criticism of popular fiction: "... but for a few exceptions, most of the novels that get published are plain trash. They are full of murder, theft, detection, whoring and anarchism. But for these the novels would never have been written". 14

When Kalaimagal wrote, "These stories that are written as novels, oh! they make their readers lustful people and drown them in the ocean of immorality", 15 it was only expressing the views of the Tamil scholarly world. M.S. Purnalingam Pillai, one of the most respected scholars of the period, in his history of Tamil literature written in English wrote on similar lines; " .... Arni Kuppuswamy Mudaliar has flooded the market with his novels which are adaptations of Reynolds’ ... What was pure and instructive at first became lax and lewd, and though the plots are well-knit, they cannot be placed in the hands of boys and virgins with safety ... In most cases the present day novelist cares less for style than for producing

13 Maraimalai Adigal, Kumudavalli, Naganattarasi, Pallavaram, 1921, p.vii.
14 Kumaran 2(6), September 1923. For more of Kumaran’s views see 3(3), June 1924; 2(1), April 1923; 2(10), January 1924; 6(4), January 1928.
15 Kalaimagal, 2(2), February 1914.
impression or tickling the readers". 16

The nationalist/conservative critique was launched by Subramania Siva, in his Gnanabhanu. He attacked novels for their corrupting influence, and the debasing effect of western values on Indian culture. 17 This Hindu nationalist critique was further extended by V.V.S. Iyer. In a pioneering article titled 'Marumalarchi' (Renaissance) published first in the 1918 annual supplement of Swadesamitran, he wrote, "when it became clear that ‘novels’ sell well, many petty-minded people started adapting hundreds of obscene stories written by Reynolds, which are despised in the English world," and opined that even an epidemic of plague and rheumatic fever were many times less harmful than these degenerate novels. 18 Bharati, too, shared his views and commented that many Tamil writers made money by adapting sub-standard English novels. 19

Suthanthira Sangu, we had quoted earlier, which too operated within the nationalist discourse, criticized popular fiction on similar lines. Satirizing the imaginary author of ‘Miss Seductive-damsel’, who had written 27 novels, averaging three volumes per novel, it queried sarcastically:

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16 M.S. Purnalingam Pillai, Tamil Literature, Munnirpallam, 1929, p. 368.
17 Gnanabhanu, 3(1), April 1915; 3(4), July 1915; 2(2), May 1914.
What novels! What sublime portrayals! Would not they weigh three stones! If all the 27 books were to be put into the cooking stove seven or eight people can not only have warm water baths but also cook their meals. If one gives a set of these books to the chemist, would not he use it for an year to pack drugs. Moreover, if all the 27 novels were to be dumped wouldn’t it fill one whole dust-bin of the Kumbakonam municipality.

Intellectuals keen on the literary aspects of the novel too joined this chorus of criticism. The views expressed by the journal Lakshmi in its review of A. Madhaviah's Muthu Meenakshi and Kusikar Kutti Kathaigal will go down as a classic, for the force of its comment:

In this age, when printing machines have become legion and the business in paper has expanded, novels have started to proliferate like colonies of termites .. as every pen-pusher has taken to novel-writing in Tamilnadu, the harm caused by contemporary novels is not little. That those who cannot even get their ‘r’s right have taken to writing can only be attributed to the bad-time of the Tamil language. One or two playboys, a couple of shameless damsels, a detective Govindan or Gopalan, one Agavali zamindar - the Tamil novel is complete. Contemporary Tamil novels spread the habits, customs and attitudes of foreign countries and send the Tamil people tumbling into the abyss of immorality. The Tamil people who know not the true novel are gobbling up this trash like fowls eating termites.

20 Suthanthira Sangu 8 July 1933. Also see issue dated 4 February 1933, article entitled 'Novel Kuppaihiotti', (The Dustbin for Novels).

21 Reproduced in Panchamirtham, 1(7), October 1924. There are two ‘r’s in the Tamil alphabet : the hard and the medium. Getting them right is a sign of good education. Govindan and Gopalan were detectives in the novels of J.R. Rangaraju.
Madhaviah too shared these views and wrote on identical lines in his review of J.R. Rangaraju's *Vijayaraghavan*. Further, he published an article on novels written by one A. Rangaswami Iyengar in his journal *Panchamirtham*, which likened novels to garbage and called for a thorough purge. P. Kothandaraman expressed identical views in K.S. Venkataramani's *Bharatamani*. Writers of the famed *Manikkodi* camp too critiqued popular fiction on such lines. Pudumaippithan's 'Thirukkural Seitha Thirukkoothu' is clearly a parody of 'whodunit' stories. In his articles too he makes mocking references to detective stories. Ku. Pa. Rajagopalan, reviewing the Tamil translation of Tagore's *Kumudhini*, remarked that detective novels were corrupting literary tastes. Interestingly, such criticism was not confined to Tamilnadu alone. It found its echoes in the Tamil-speaking areas of Sri Lanka too.

Thus all middle class intellectuals shared a contempt for the new cultural form, the novel. Their critique revolved around the same themes. Firstly, all the novels were seen as vapid translations of degenerate English novels. The name of the mid-Victorian popular novelist G.W.M. Reynolds is ubiquitous in this context. Moreover, it

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22 *Panchamirtham*, 2(6), September 1925.
23 Ibid., 2(6), September 1925.
24 *Bharatamani*, 3(4), 22 October 1939.
26 *Pudumaippithan Katturaigal*, Madras, 1988, pp. 9; 43; 153.
27 *Manikkodi*, 4(8), 15 December 1936.
was alleged that these adaptations were done surreptitiously. Frequently the same novel was adapted by more than one writer without stating it openly and readers were taken for a ride.\textsuperscript{29} Perhaps the most caustic comment in this regard was made by T. Chelvakesavaraya Mudaliar in his English preface to the Tamil translation of Le Quex's 'Whoso Findeth a Wife': "Many of the so-called Tamil adaptations of English novels are misleading, and most of them appear uncouth in Tamil like the English people of Salvation Army in Hindu dress".\textsuperscript{30} The novels were seen as the work of uneducated hacks, with mercenary intent. For Lakshmi, these novelists could not even get their 'r's right. As a remedial measure they exhorted learned men not to look down upon novel-writing and take it up. It was contended that western values expressed in the novels were harmful to Indian/Tamil society and culture. A common fear of western materialistic ideals was held, as they were seen to corrupt the spiritual life of the people. Moreover the novels were seen to titillate the base sexual passions of the readers. Again and again the point is made that the novels are full of obscenities, adultery and debauchery. So widespread was this complaint that readers had to frequently read these novels in secret. Finally, the pernicious effects of the novels on women was the most feared. Considering the central importance given to the redefinition of womanhood by the middle-class intellectuals in colonial India we shall deal with it in a separate section(3.3).

What was common to all this criticism was the contempt

\textsuperscript{29} Amirthaguna Bodhini, 16 July 1932; Katha Mohana Ranjitham 1915, reproduced in Kumari Malar, 31 (4), July 1974.

\textsuperscript{30} Ellal allathu Nalla Manaiviye Nalla Porul, 1914.
for popular fiction. This contempt is nowhere more explicit than in a resolution passed at the Thondamandalam High School, by a group of respectable men, when the Government of Madras sought to prosecute the publishers of the Tamil classics *Kavadi Chindu* and *Virali Vidu Thoothu*, (for more details see 6.6.1) on grounds of obscenity. They argued; "[These works], were written only to benefit the learned, the devoted and so very limited circles of men, whose minds these [obscene] passages of rare occurrence could not poison. The general public of the present day do not or are not likely to read such works... If the Police wish to protect the minds of the common people, the right books that they have to direct their efforts against are the low priced Tamil novels that are daily coming out of the press".31

3.3 *Women and Popular Fiction*

As novels began to get published in increasing numbers more and more women were drawn towards them. In the debates discussed earlier, women are mentioned as readers ever so often. *Suthanthira Sangu* remarked that women enjoy heavenly bliss while reading novels.32 *Panchamirtham* commented that women were addicted to novels next only to jewels.33 But the most stinging comment was made by A. Subramania Bharati (not the poet) in his preface to Kothainayaki Ammal’s *Senbaga Vijayam* (1927). He wrote

31 Clipping from the Hindu dated 31 July 1912 in G.O. No. 289, Judicial & Confidential, 11 February 1913.
32 Suthanthira Sangu. 8 July 1933.
33 Panchamirtham, 2(6), September 1925.
that novels were being mostly read by women who had no work and menstruating women who had nothing worthwhile to do while in ritual seclusion. In fact V.V.S. Iyer squarely blamed women for the proliferation of pulp fiction.

Given the centrality of the women's question in the political agenda of the colonial intellectuals, it is hardly surprising that this issue was taken up in right earnest. The colonial intellectuals, in their struggle against colonialism, had worked out a dichotomy: material/spiritual and outer/inner, which could be extended to man/woman and world/home. While the west was seen to be superior in the material sphere, India could hold its own in the spiritual sphere. Thus only a selective appropriation of western achievements, namely science and technology, would be made while Indian spiritual values would be clung on to. The home (and the woman too) was to be a terrain where no quarter would be given to the west.

Given this understanding of the women's question would the intellectuals permit pulp fiction to hold women in its corrupting tentacles? The point is made most dramatically in Thiru. Vi. Ka's Pennin Perumai Allathu Valkai Thunai, the exemplary text defining Tamil womanhood.

35 Quoted in Vasantham, 4(1), April 1945.
37 Madras, 1927, pp. 97-8
... Young women should not be permitted to hear revelling stories, pseudo-novels and other such stuff; nor should they even touch such books. Parents should take special care in this regard. These pseudo-novels are corrupting the woman's world. Women should realize that pseudo-novels will ruin their lives like poison. I know many women, who, reading these pseudo-novels and pseudo-plays, have ruined their peaceful lives and later rued their mistake. Dear children, don't read these novels; don't even touch them. Your life will be ruined. You will suffer in disease and ailments. Why did the good Lord make you - to wither away at a tender age? To suffer in disease? To be despised by your brothers, relatives and those around you? No. No. "You must become mothers; you must lead happy lives": this is the divine purpose. You who were born to fulfill this sublime goal, should you ruin your life by going crazy after despicable novels? Don't read these pseudo-novels. Parents and teachers must take care to keep these pseudo-novels away from the sight of young women.

The subconscious male fear of a woman's sexuality getting unshackled can be seen clearly in this passionate plea. For the man, a woman's sexuality needed to be controlled and kept in check. And novels posed a great threat to this control. The near-hysteria about the titillating and suggestive character of the novels can be understood only in this light.\(^\text{38}\) It was against this background that greater control over women reading novels was sought to be exercised. The noted-writer and translator Saraswathi Ramnath recollects in a recent interview\(^\text{39}\) how in her girlhood days (in the mid-1930s), girls were not generally permitted to read novels

\(^{38}\) See the editorial on 'Women and Novel' in Ananda Bodhini, 2 (6), December 1916.

and how novels were often put away in the loft, out of reach of children. When Kumudhini, another writer, contemporaneously observed that she never read any novels, it only bears testimony to the successful policing by the middle-class patriarchs.40

The following dialogue occurring in a contemporary novel, Chandrasekari further strengthens our argument. Gunavathy, a novelist, meets with the heroine Chandrasekari and asks her if she had ever read her novels. Getting a reply in the negative, she asks:

Gunavathy: Reading novels has beneficial effects - why not read them?

Chandrasekari: Had I known that novel-reading is good, I'd have read them. Or had I known that it is not harmful, I might have yet read them.

Guna: So you seem to believe reading novels is harmful, right?

Chandra: I neither have a good opinion about novels nor any bad opinion. One day my uncle instructed me not to read novels. Ever since I have not read any.41

Thus avuncular men tried to keep little women in check. Perhaps they were even successful to a great degree. But women's appetite for reading had been whetted and there was an ever growing demand for stories that women could 'safely' read. It was at this juncture that Vai. Mu. Kothainayaki Ammal entered the scene. Born in a Brahmin middle-class family with scholarly antecedents, she

41 Sundararajan, Sivapathasundaram, op.cit., p. 132.
started writing novels around 1924, about a decade after the beginnings of popular fiction. Her sentimental stories woven around middle-class family life were an instant success. Now women could read without fear as these novels held no subversive potential. Between 1924 and the early 1950s she wrote no less than 115 novels. The monthly Jaganmohini in which she published all her novels in serial form, sold as many as 10,000 copies every month.\textsuperscript{42} By 1940 women constituted an important segment of Tamil readers. So prevalent was the reading habit among women that, as a contemporary columnist in Ananda Vikatan observed in a lighter vein, women were of two types: those who read novels and those who did not.\textsuperscript{43}

Thus a significant aspect of Tamil publishing in the inter-war period was the large presence of women as readers. As Kalaimagal\textsuperscript{44} of Pondicherry observed, women who had earlier been reading chapbooks and 'big-letter' editions (for details, see 7.3) were now reading novels.

3.4 \textit{Responding to Criticism}

We narrated in detail the volley of criticism that popular fiction had to face for a decade or two from the beginning of the First World War. How this critique was confronted by those directly involved in the production of popular fiction will bring into focus the question of the hegemonic hold that the middle class was struggling to acquire in Tamil society.

\textsuperscript{42} Information on Kothainayaki Ammal is drawn from the biography by Aranga Seenivasan, Eluthulaga Nayaki, Madras, 1988.

\textsuperscript{43} Ananda Vikatan, 15(34), 25 August 1940.

\textsuperscript{44} January 1916.
Ananda Bodhini was one of the very first to respond to the critique of popular fiction. This was the journal which published all of Arani Kuppuswami Mudaliar’s numerous novels both in serial form and later as separate books. It enjoyed immense success claiming a 5,000 strong subscription list even within a year of its inception in 1916.45 When a correspondent from a village in Rasipuram taluk of Salem district wrote to its editor about a lecture that was delivered in a local club about the undesirability of reading novels, the editor responded that only if both good and evil were portrayed could readers understand the need to keep off evil. He quoted a Tamil proverb which said only a person who has been out in the sun will know the importance of shade.46 Ananda Bodhini’s response to criticism continued on the same lines throughout its career. It conceded that there were indeed novels that were corrupting. But there were others too which could lead one on to the right path.47

Arani Kuppuswamy Mudaiiar used the same logic to defend himself. In his 1919 preface to Karkottai,48 he wrote:

Dear readers, like my other novels this one too does not contain any repulsive aspects or words that are not fit to be read by chaste women. Some say that stories which

45 Ananda Bodhini, 1(12), June 1916.
46 Ibid., 5(2), August 1919.
47 Ibid., 10(4), December 1924.
speak of evil deeds and evil people should never be read. This is a misplaced belief. Only if we get to know the actions of evil people and the price they pay for it later, will we resolve to keep clear of such evil out of fear and repulsion.

Panaiyappa Chettiar, another novelist, also defended himself on the same plea in his 1929 preface to Kanthimathi. 49

Thus the defence of the popular novelists was set within the discourse of the middle-class intellectuals. They did not attempt to challenge the terms of the debate and question, for instance, the material basis of their moral pontification. The other novelists too conformed to this discourse by remaining silent and continuing to write as usual. All their novels paid lip-service to morality, with the culprits getting punished and the noble being rewarded at the end.

But the relationship between the popular novelists and their critics is very complex. They were in a dialectical relationship, constantly interacting with each other. The art form of the novel was gaining such pre-dominance in the inter-war period that the critics themselves had to write novels and try to offer counter-models. In fact A. Subramania Bharati and Subramania Siva themselves wrote novels. But their attempts fell flat on the face. The titles themselves smacked of the characteristics of popular novels. 50 When K.R. Govindaraja Mudaliar, the Tamil scholar, wrote novels, they were no worse or no better than the popular ones. 51 Only he got his ‘r’s right!

50 Siva's novel was titled Nalinasundari allathu Nagarika Thadapudal, while one of A. Subramania Bharati's novels was called Jattavallabār.
51 See his Mathana Manohari, Madras, 1924.
Maraimalai Adigal too only ended up adapting in chaste, high-flown Tamil, a Reynolds novel. This could explain why even a radical novel written by Muvaloor Ramamirtham Ammaiyan critiquing the Devadasi system had to have a saucy title like 'The Wire Net of the Devadasis or a Playboy Turned Wise' (1938). This contradiction was to be resolved only in the late 1930s, to which we now turn.

3.5 *Towards Respectability*

The Tamil novel's climb from notoriety to respectability is closely linked with the fortunes of *Ananda Vikatan* and its de facto editor, 'Kalki' R. Krishnamurty. S.S. Vasan, its publisher and de jure editor started his career as a mail-order businessman and advertising agent. Later he wrote and published a few detective novels and some obscene, illustrated books too. But when he acquired *Ananda Vikatan* in February 1928, a tottering humour magazine, he adopted a new business tactic. Abandoning his earlier ways, he hit upon a successful mix of humour, fiction and cartoons with a dash of nationalism. Besides, he conducted crossword puzzle contests with fabulous prizes, which gave a boost to *Ananda Vikatan*’s circulation. In this business venture Vasan recruited the services of Kalki towards the end of 1928. Kalki had begun his career as a sub-editor in Thiru. Vi. Kaliyanasundara Mudaliar’s *Navasakti*. Later he joined C.

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52 For a thorough analysis of this novel, see Anandhi S., 'Representing Devadasis: 'Dasigal Mosavalai' as a Radical Text', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, March 1991.

53 See advertisements in *Lakshmi*, 3(9), April 1926 and 3(10), May 1926. Sunda, in his biography of Kalki, *Ponniyin Puthalvar*, Madras, 1976, p. 201 mentions Vasan's detective novels but keeps mum on the issue of publishing obscene books.

54 Sunda, *op.cit.*, pp. 204-5.
Rajagopalachariar at his Thiruchengode Gandhi Asramam and edited the temperance journal Vimosanam. Kalki remained Ananda Vikantan's de facto editor till 1940.

As a young boy he had been an avid reader of detective fiction. Yet he too criticized popular fiction. In Ananda Vikatan he wrote:

Some time ago I chanced to read a couple of recent Tamil novels. Oh, I cannot express my horror. Before I could get past a few pages, I felt as if I was rolling in the gutter. Well, even if one rolls in the gutter, one can cleanse oneself with soap. But the filth that dirties the mind isn't cleansed as easily. Only after sleeping for a couple of nights did I feel sufficiently clean. I thought that the right punishment to any one who gives such a book to young men and women is to have his hands chopped off.

But it is certain that Kalki too learnt some of the tricks of the trade from these popular novels. Take for instance, his acclaimed Thiyaga Bhoomi (1939). The story has all the ingredients of popular fiction thrown in in ample measure. A cruel step-mother, adultery, a wayward husband, a rags-to-riches story, a lost child, a bank fraud, a sensational court case and a happy ending. But there was one crucial aspect which gave the novel its respectability - nationalism. The Congress makes its appearance at the most unlikely places. An old conservative brahmin, Sambu Sastri all of a sudden dons khadi and leads a procession; jumping into congress-politics is

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55 See Kalki's preface to the Tamil translation of R.K. Narayan's Swamiyum Snegithargalum, Madras, 1939.
56 Ananda Vikatan, 10 June 1933.
implicitly equated to renouncing worldly life. In the climax, the wayward and adulterous husband, guilty of defrauding a bank, and hardhearted enough to legally press for restitution of conjugal rights on an unwilling wife, is condoned by his wife, when he joins her in picketing and courting arrest, thanks to the Congress. In Kalki's fiction, nationalism is a rootless wonder. Converts to the Congress creed are won over in a jiffy. Not for him the tortuous (and as some would argue, imperfect) process of nationalist mobilization.

Consequently, Kalki's fiction was a resounding success. When his biographer writes, ".... Three lakhs of Tamils read his 'Thiyaga Bhoomi' when it was serialized in Ananda Vikatan from the new year of 1939. Their eagerness could be seen in the way they jostled each other to buy Vikatan at the stalls. Similar incidents could be seen at railway stations where Vikatan consignments landed. There were many who read it at the railway station either due to their eagerness or because there would be many to compete for the copy", it reads dangerously close to the earlier demand for popular fiction.

Kalki's political affiliations too propped him up. All through his life he was part of Rajagopalachariar's clique. He was an important member of its literary wing too, which was under the magnetic influence of T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar. With both political and cultural power and prestige, this faction asserted itself and tried to generate consent for its programme. In the world of literature, they tried to construct a Tamil tradition which excluded Sangam literature and the medieval scholastic commentaries. Kambaramayanam was given a central place and Tamil literary

57 Sunda, op.cit., p. 455.
tradition constructed around it. Kalki was accorded a pride of place in the pantheon of modern writers along with Kavimani Desigasvinayakam Pillai. When T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar\textsuperscript{58} and Professor S. Vaiyapuri Pillai\textsuperscript{59} contributed forewords to his books, they had put the stamp of respectability to the Tamil novel. Now

.... we can see women grinding paste with one hand and holding Kalki's book in the other; rocking the cradle with one hand and reading the book in the other. That school boys and girls read Vikatan in classrooms is a frequent complaint of teachers. Apart from provision stores, sweetmeat shops and retailers of mangoes under mango trees, we can see smoking people reading Kalki in the first and second class railway compartments. In every nook and cranny of Tamilnadu these stories make people laugh, startle and cry. Tamil readership has now reached forty and fifty thousands.\textsuperscript{60}

Thus with Kalki the contradiction that had emerged in the Tamil cultural sphere due to the rise of popular fiction had been more or less resolved in accordance with the preferred goals of the middle class. The ‘positive’ aspects of popular fiction had been successfully appropriated: thrill, suspense, gripping narrative, pace, unexpected twists, facile prose, sentiment and melodrama were to be found in good measure in the Kalkian variety of fiction. But all these aspects of popular fiction were kept within limits. They were used in

\textsuperscript{58} Kalki, \textit{Kanaiyaliyin Kanavu}, Madras, 1938.


\textsuperscript{60} T.K.C's Foreword to \textit{Kanaiyaliyin Kanavu}, Madras, 1938. Kailasapathy puts across this point more bluntly: "Using pedestrian themes, in a prose that holds no novelty or creativity, Kalki wrote stories in indifferent Tamil that could be read by the entire family in respectable homes." Kailasapathy, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 97.
controlled doses, to excite and consequently to deaden taste and imagination but never to exceed the boundary of middle-class genteelity. Now women too could safely read as their hands ground paste for idly or rocked the cradle. But the boundary line is a nebulous one and constantly shifting, the investigation of which is beyond our scope here.

In another sense too, the middle class had had their say. It concerns the construction of the works that would constitute the classics of modern Tamil fiction. In the tirades against popular fiction that were discussed in earlier sections, the self-appointed guardians of culture frequently harked back to the works of Vedanayakam Pillai, Madhavaiah, Rajam Aiyar and Natesa Sastri. By the end of our period their Prathapa Mudaliar Charithiram, Kamalambal Charithiram and Padmavathy Charithiram had been acclaimed as classics, and their authors, pioneering greats. As a corollary to this, the first three and a half decades of this century were seen as the dark age until Kalki rode into the scene on Ananda Vikatan. 61

3.6 Concluding Remarks

The rise of the novel and its attendant controversies and debates form an interesting part of modern Tamil intellectual history. The course of these debates shows the maturing of the Tamil middle class and its self-definition vis-a-vis other classes. Given the fact that the middle class entertained hegemonic aspirations and sought to

61 Kalki’s success did not go uncontested. Literary producers of the Manikkodi faction, especially Pudumaippithan, challenged Kalki on artistic grounds. For details, see Raghunathan, Pudumaippithan Varalaru, Madras, 1951. As for the novels of Arani and Vaduvoor, they continued to be reprinted and sold until even the 1950s, though they ceased to be in the limelight.
enforce its writ on the society at large, especially in the cultural sphere, it had a more direct bearing on the publishing world.

Popular novels were what decisively cut off Tamil publishing from the vestigial conduits of patronage and resolved the dilemmas of the transition to the market. By the 1920s, all talk about patronage had ended, which was quite prevalent even during the transitional phase. Now, in the post-First World War period, attention shifted to the growing number of readers, the widening of the book-market and the proliferation of novels. While these features were welcome to the middle class, it had reservations about the cultural implications. Middle-class intellectuals took up the issue and debated it until the contradiction was resolved with the entry of Kalki and his nationalist novels. Further, a new mode of reading, i.e., reading in silence, had also emerged during the inter-war period, to successfully tackle the new art form (the novel) and consume it on its own terms (for details, see Chapter 7). The emergence of this ‘modern’ mode of reading, coupled with the fact that it was the cultural practice of a class with hegemonic aspirations, fuelled the expansion of Tamil publishing.

Consequently, through the course of the century, mainstream Tamil publishing came into the hands of the middle class, which decisively led it into the market, making a clear break with patronage. It was only after this rupture that the emergence of the distinct categories/ institutions of author, publisher and printer, which are eminently the products of the market and the book as a commodity, becomes possible in the world of Tamil book-publishing, which concerns us in Chapter 4.