

Article

The Global Ballad: Kuyili, Female Militancy, and Romantic Untranslatability

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Abstract

This article examines the revival of the Romantic Ballad in contemporary anglophone writing through Vanavil K. Ravi's *The Ballad of the Warrior-Girl*, which reimagines the Tamil folk figure, Kuyili and her role in the Sivagangai rebellion, a Romantic-era anti-colonial uprising in South India. In retelling this folk memory, Ravi mobilizes a Romantic-era form to recast an instance of a local uprising, rife with caste dynamics, into a national and globalized narrative aligned with neo-nationalist storytelling conventions. By transforming a lower-caste, female militant in a local language into a Hindu, pan-Indian icon of patriotic martyrdom, Ravi's ballad participates in a larger trend of globalized translations. I situate the text within intersecting histories of Romanticisms, balladic traditions, and the global circulation of literary forms. Through this, I outline what I call the 'global ballad' as distinct from the 'globalized ballad'. While the latter flattens cultural difference into consumable cosmopolitanism, the former centers opacity and untranslatability across rhizomatic relationalities. I show how reading literary texts alongside different critical traditions is a productive way to counter the exoticized, neoliberal circulation of literature in translation.

Keywords: South India; anti-colonialism; Kuyili; Romantic Ballad; nationalism

1. Introduction: The Return to Romanticism

On 9 October 2024, M.K. Stalin, the Chief Minister of the southernmost Indian state, Tamil Nadu, unveiled a statue of Kuyili for her contribution to the 1780 anti-colonial uprising ([The Hindu 2024](#)). A year before that, the right-wing Union government¹, as part of the 75th anniversary of Indian Independence, published several graphic narratives, one of which was titled *India's Unsung Heroes: The Brave Women of our Freedom Struggle* ([Amrit Kaal 2021](#)). A section of these narratives featured Kuyili as a brave warrior who fought the British forces in South India. Some historians questioned the veracity of Kuyili as a historical figure who was being commemorated both by the Union and State governments ([Mayilvaganan 2025](#))². Kuyili's identity has been embroiled in several renewed, heated debates in India in the last five years³. In this broader context of socio-political conversations surrounding Kuyili, several literary works have been published, one of which is Vanavil K. Ravi's (2022), *The Ballad of the Warrior Girl: Kuyili*⁴.

This article examines the afterlives of Romanticism via an anti-colonial uprising, a female militant, and a literary form mediating them both—the Ballad. I argue that Romantic, balladic nationalism and uprisings are engaged by neo-nationalist storytelling through a globalized literary culture. These attempts reinvent aspects of nationalist literary historiography and its fashioning of the Ballad. This results in what I am calling the globalized



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Ballad, of which Ravi's ballad is an exemplary case. It primarily involves recalibrating the folklore hero's relationship to their immediate world and worldview. Local untranslatability is morphed into and replaced with a universally consumable cosmopolitanism in the case of the globalized Ballad. In its place, I make a case for the global Ballad as a form that, in its planetary relations, still has complexity, opacity, and untranslatability as a structuring and defining feature. References to culture-specific social practices, naming traditions, cosmologies, and literary conventions continue to thrive in the global Ballad with their untranslatability. The globalized Ballad on the other hand, violently translates these opaque poetics into an easily consumable, self-explanatory, and stand-alone literary product which inevitably is possible only through an adherence to (neo-)colonial literary conventions and canon that drive the translation industry even today. I argue that the global balladic tradition in its Romantic iteration can be engaged to unsettle the globalized Ballad. A primary mode of that engagement is a reading practice that situates ballads in different cultures of balladic criticism, thereby resisting the market circulation of literary commodities in isolation from their literary history. Accordingly, I read Ravi's ballad and its characterization of the folk hero alongside Tamil and English balladic traditions.

The global Ballad, thus understood, contributes to scholarship that continues to trace the imperial circulation of literary forms and canon, and the simultaneous circulation of an anti-colonial investment in local cultures. Katherine Trumpener, for instance, has influentially argued how English Enlightenment's "famous indifference to cultural tradition catalyzes literary counter-representations and the articulation of an oppositional nationalist aesthetics" (Trumpener 1997, p. xii). She shows how cultural 'revivals' "partly offset a process of cultural centralization" (Trumpener 1997, p. xi). Cultural revivals, and for our purposes, ballad revivals more specifically, thus have a long tradition of resisting processes of "cultural centralization" that the British Empire undertakes. However, this strand of scholarship limits the focus of such dynamic local investments to the framework of the nation-state. Critical global studies, on the other hand, helps us approach the rhizomatic, multidirectional interactions among literary cultures beside, if not beyond, the framework of the nation-state⁵.

Ravi's ballad narrates the story of Kuyili, a semi-fictional character, otherwise absent or marginal in historical narratives. Central to Kuyili's story is the battle at Kalayar Koil in South India, where in 1772 British troops led by Joseph Smith and Benjour defeated and killed Muthu Vaduganatha Thevar of Sivaganga kingdom and his troops in a fierce battle. Muthu Vaduganatha Thevar had made trade agreements with the Dutch and resisted the British demands to pay tributes to the Nawab of Arcot. His wife, the Queen Velu Nachiar, and their daughter Vellachi Nachiar fled the battlefield, seeking refuge in nearby districts. Among others, Hyder Ali helped Velu Nachiar gather the military resources required to launch an attack on the British to regain control over Sivaganga, which she eventually did. In most historical accounts of these decades, Velu Nachiar herself is relegated to a marginal role, and Kuyili is barely mentioned⁶. Tamil folklore, on the other hand, has several references to this set of anti-colonial battles. It is this rich tradition that popular culture has resurrected and adapted in recent public discourse—something Ravi deftly engages in his ballad. Today, Kuyili is believed to be a Dalit woman⁷ who managed to impress Queen Velu Nachiar with her loyalty and martial skills. Crucial to the modern retelling of this relationship is the implicit suggestion that the Queen "allowed" Kuyili into her inner circle, "despite" her being a Dalit woman. Queen Nachiar is said to have made her a commander in her army. After seven to eight years of training in exile, Nachiar's army attacks Sivaganga to regain control. On the day of the planned attack, Kuyili notices the armory of the British troops in a temple and realizes that their chances of winning a battle against them are bleak. She is said to have lit herself on fire and jumped into

the armory from a tower nearby, leading to the complete destruction of the ammunition stored there. Kuyili dies in the event and is claimed to be and celebrated as the first suicide bomber in India, if not the world, today. Kuyili's identity is inextricably tied to her suicide bombing. It is in and through her destruction of herself that she manages to write herself into Tamil cultural memory, if not history. This article examines the globalized Ballad's retelling of this memory through three sections: first, the Ballad form's relation to riots and history; second, an outline of how I define and read the global Ballad; and third, the mode of characterization that is central to the globalized Ballad.

2. Ballads in Times of Riots

Vanavil Ravi begins the preface to the ballad with a nod to the rich tradition of conversation around the Ballad and historiography. He writes, 'The world celebrates every moment of historic significance. When such a moment is also heroic, it is preserved in memory, in the memory of mankind, however hazy it might tend to become with the passage of time' (Ravi 2022, p. 7). We see scholars frequently return to this question about the Ballad and history. As Meredith Martin writes, "Ballads were at once imagined to be the authentic record of a nation's earliest poets as well as evidence of early songs that appeared at the beginning of every culture" (Martin 2015, p. 348). This idea that in the beginning was the Ballad and the Ballad was with the nation has informed much of Ballad studies, either fortifying this approach or criticizing it. For instance, Thomas Percy, in one of the earliest modern instances of recording folklore and ballads—*Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, treats ballads as historical sources. The preface to the book and "An Essay on the Ancient Minstrels in England" narrate historical incidents that Percy gathered from the manuscripts he anthologized and edited for this collection (Percy 1857). N. Vānamāmalai⁸, in his *Tamizhar Naatupadal* (trans. *Tamil Folksongs*)—another prominent instance of the anthologizing of ballads—remarks that ballads "express the reflections of country folk about a given incident." (translation mine) (Vānamāmalai 1964, p. 3). S. Muruganandham, in his *Nātupura Pādalgalil Varalātru Seidhigal* (trans. *Historical Information in Folksongs*), similarly, demonstrates how folksongs could be used as historical documents (Muruganandham 1991)⁹. More specifically, ballads are often engaged as sites to reconstruct a 'history from below'¹⁰. What is often sidelined in these conversations is the particular *stylization* of history, and particularly of an "event", that ballads undertake. Instead of considering ballads as mere repositories of historical data, I turn to look at them as narrativizing tools that render the event narratable, and regulate our affective responses to this narrativized event. Ballads in this approach emerge as both historiographical and esthetic tools. To treat ballads in this manner, they need to be accounted for as poetic utterances and performances with a specific, qualitatively different kind of historical 'presence'.

Ravi acknowledges this contested relation between ballads and history in the preface to the poem. He writes:

Some researchers say that the story of this ballad is wholly a figment of imagination and challenge the historicity of the protagonist here. They may be right. Still, I firmly believe that even the most fertile imagination cannot create such a character and such a story from out of nothing. Lack of adequate evidence may leave a fact "Not Proved", but would never disprove it to be discarded as untrue. Factor not, the story inspires and I want to believe that it happened thus. (Ravi 2022, p. 9)

Ravi maintains that people's imagination is not completely fictional and suggests that we entertain the possibility of imagination's products being historically true. For MSS Pandian, people's "utterances" are key sites for historiographical consideration. Writing critically of the Cambridge School of historiography, he argues that "utterances" should be

treated as crucial objects of history and not ignored through the historiographical focus on ‘outcomes’. He notes that the Cambridge School “devalued what was enunciated by the participants in history and instead deduced their intentions from the so-called outcomes of history. That is, utterances are denied the status of conscious acts and are treated as though they are without any autonomous domain of influence” (Pandian 1995, p. 387). Pandian here is making a case for utterances to be acknowledged as their own presences in history “whose materiality is mere fiction for the Cambridge historians” (Pandian 1995, p. 390). Anahid Nersessian looks at these ‘utterances’ more specifically within the realm of literary forms. In *Calamity Form*, she writes, “the figurative, nonreferential, and antidenotative properties of esthetic objects—here, poems—are longstanding, highly developed competencies well suited to a historical era” (Nersessian 2020, p. 5). Her account of what poems do in history turns poetic absence into a “curious kind of presence” (Nersessian 2020, p. 5). It is this historical presence of poetry that I explore through this article with regard to the Ballad, which takes on a specific significance given the form’s long-standing complex relation to historiography.

Further, the Ballad-as-utterance often narrativizes an event that too has a peculiar and curious kind of presence vis-à-vis history. An event, as Alain Badiou theorizes it, is founded on an exclusion that erupts onto the political stage. An event is “invariably elusive” (Badiou 2012, p. 56) even as it very visibly rends the socio-political and esthetic fabric. The event, he writes, is “what makes possible the restitution of the inexistent” (Badiou 2012, p. 56). It emerges out of nothing, and pre-event indices are only ascribed to it retrospectively. The event needs a militant being and their labor to engage and propagate it. He writes, “An organization lies at the intersection between an Idea and an event. However, this intersection only exists as process, whose immediate subject is the political militant. The militant is a hybrid being, since she is what a riotous movement that has once again been seized hold of by the Idea can give birth to” (Badiou 2012, p. 63). ‘Organization’ for him is the formalization of the constitutive features of the event, where through mediation, the event transitions from the real to the symbolic, in the Lacanian sense (Badiou 2012, p. 66). Evental rupture, he argues, creates the “possibility of the unforeseen historical unfolding of some immediate riot” (Badiou 2012, p. 28). The Sivaganga riots, in our case, stem primarily from the evental rupture that the detonation of the British armory causes. This evental rupture is what is hotly contested, especially its ascription to Kuyili. For a long time, the Sivaganga riots remained rather local in a manner that Badiou characterizes as an immediate riot. “[A]n immediate riot is located in the territory of those who take part in it. The issue of the localization of riots is . . . quite fundamental” (Badiou 2012, p. 23). Historians like K. Rajayyan, by arguing for these riots as the “origins” of the Indian Independence struggle, read the riots against this localization. Ravi’s poem too reads against this localization and mediates and globalizes the event and the riots through Romantic balladic nationalism. It does so in the context of what Badiou calls a “time of riots”. Ravi returns to the Ballad, the female militant, and questions of belonging in the backdrop of a series of riots in India that reopened the question of anti-state uprisings and their relation to (neo-) nationalism¹¹. Prominent among these is the anti-CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) protests of 2020 where Muslim women led a peaceful, indefinite sit-in against the ruling right-wing government’s proposal to amend the basis of national belonging. The amendment proposed citizenship to religious minorities persecuted in India’s neighboring countries (BBC 2019). However, it only accommodated Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and Parsis from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. It deliberately left out Muslims from the list, and critics accused the government of making religion the basis of citizenship, something that India’s secular constitution had thoughtfully avoided. Muslim women protesting at Shaheen

Bagh—the primary site of the protests—forced majoritarian discourse to confront several aspects of public imagination of the ‘anti-national’ Muslim. Against the image of an anti-national Muslim as a violent, weapons-carrying young man, the Shaheen Bagh protests offered an anti-government protest led by non-violent Muslim women of middle and older ages. In many senses, the protest at this site was an event in its own right. This protest, that ‘erupted’ two years before Ravi’s ballad was published, brought to the fore, in an intensified manner, questions about Indian patriotism, religion, uprisings, female bodies, and national belonging.

It is in this ethos that Ravi revisits Kuyili as an anti-colonial female warrior through the Ballad. Interestingly, the Union right-wing government actively endorsed the publication of Ravi’s ballad and facilitated its broader circulation, including its translations into other Indian and international languages such as French, Hindi, and Telugu (Dinamani 2024). Badiou is certain that “our masters know this [the rebirth of History, i.e.,] better than us. . .and [are] building up their weaponry, in the form both of their judicial arsenal and the armed taskforces charged with planetary order” (Badiou 2012, pp. 5, 6). Globalization of literary forms is part of this “planetary order” that is invested in the fantasy of the seamless flow of ‘weaponry’, ‘judicial arsenal’, commodities and labor-power.

V. Kadambari, in her foreword to Ravi’s ballad, draws attention to this globalizing effect: “This unique story that has been passed on for many generations in the region [Sivaganga], is set to reach a universal audience now, through this English rendering” (Ravi 2022, p. 13). Ravi’s ‘English rendering’ globalizes the riots, Kuyili, and the local Ballad through the framework of (neo-)nationalism. In the prolog, he writes, “The setting is Sivaganga/ And its surroundings,/ The land of loyal warriors,/ The land of great musings,/ The land of Tamil, the sweetest of/ All the languages,/ A part of Bharat, India,/ The land of Rishis and Sages” (Ravi 2022, p. 20). Folklore about Sivaganga, which is otherwise localized with hardly any reference to India as a country—even in the anti-colonial struggles—is now folded into the national geography and consciousness in this retelling. The specificity offered through ‘Sivaganga’ and ‘Tamil’ culture is valid only within the context of the nation. Further, this reframing globalizes Kuyili through a specific flavor of nationalism made evident through references such as: ‘Bharat. . .The land of Rishis and Sages.’ Hindu right-wing organizations and political parties in India, including the ruling-class Union government, deliberately refer to India as ‘Bharat’ (preferred because of its alleged Sanskrit roots) and claim that it is a Hindu nation (of Rishis and Sages)¹². This reframing of Kuyili that Ravi undertakes renders her and her locale an integral part of the nation-state. As we will see later, he also transforms her into a patriotic martyr from a local tragic folk hero, in line with this process of (neo-) nationalization.

Kuyili and Queen Nachiar’s cosmopolitanism are highlighted throughout the poem. Kuyili, as the patriotic martyr in Ravi’s globalized Ballad, has smoothed out the internal contradictions of national belonging and has instead packaged a homogenous, different-enough nation ready for easy global circulation and consumption. He further underscores this version of Kuyili in the epilog: ‘Joan of Arc and Abbakka/Were her [Kuyili’s] forerunners./ Lakshmi Bai to Lakshmi Seghal/ Several after her./ In that hall of fame, Kuyili/ And Velu Naachiar—will/ Shine forever brilliantly—like/ Two bright stars!’ (Ravi 2022, p. 80). Throughout the ballad, he continues to draw similar parallels to universal examples. For instance, in Canto IV titled ‘Udayal: The Martyr’, he compares Kuyili and the female militants to those trained in Dahomey. An endnote adds that Dahomey

was a West African Kingdom, having been in existence from 1600 to 1900. It had a unique all-female military unit called the Dahomey Amazons by European observers. There is no consensus on the period when this all-women army was established. It could have been a few years before or after the formation of

a similar all-women army by Queen Velu Naachiar as narrated in this ballad. (Ravi 2022, p. 83)

In Canto V, he elaborates on Queen Nachiar's meeting with Hyder Ali in seeking military support for her counter-attack. Here, Queen Nachiar emerges as a cosmopolitan figure who can traverse seamlessly across linguistic, cultural, and religious boundaries. She talks eloquently to Hyder Ali in Urdu, which Ravi says is 'The language spoken by many/Muslims of India./Urdu, we call it now;/The language of Love!' (Ravi 2022, pp. 38, 39).

Prominent Urdu poets like Amir Kushro and Mirza Ghalib make special appearances in the poem alongside Urdu lines printed with their translation. In Canto 5, we are told, Queen Nachiar says, "A Doha of Amir Kushro/'Kushro darya prem ka, ulli wa ki dhaar,/Joutra so doob gaya, jo dooba so paar/' 'O Kushro, the River of Love/That runs in strange directions/The one who dives would drown in it/The one who drowns would reach/The shore, opposite'" (Ravi 2022, p. 39). Maalan in his endorsement of the ballad writes that Amir Kushro, "is one of the first recorded Indian personages with a true multicultural or pluralistic identity" (Ravi 2022, p. 18). This seamless translation and transition across boundaries are what critics of globalization and specific versions of cosmopolitanism have drawn attention to.

Ravi's Kuyili and the folktale are rewritten within the Westphalian setup of nations that are recognized globally. To be provided a dignified seat in the global theater of nation-states, one needs to represent a nation-state. As Dipesh Chakrabarty and others argue in the introduction to *Cosmopolitanism*, "nationhood is the social form that renders modernity self-conscious. . . ' and it 'may be the common currency of world culture and international politics, but its varied geopolitical histories have demonstrated, more often than not, the terrible asymmetries of the idea of modernity itself" (Chakrabarty et al. 2002, p. 6). Kuyili and her local relations are translated into representing India as a non-contradictory imagined community. It is only by being written into that recognizable form of national difference that Kuyili can be globalized. Cultural products such as this, imagine a fantasy of the free flow of people and figures across national boundaries. They are a constitutive part of the fiction of free movement under neoliberalism. This version of cosmopolitanism, as Eddy Kent and Terri Tomskey argue, represent projects "imposed by the forces of capitalism and imperialism" (Kent and Tomskey 2017, p. 15). "The unequal effects of a globalized political economy," they add, "not only contradict cosmopolitan ideals, but also result in enforced cosmopolitans: individuals whom we might consider unwilling citizens of the world" (Kent and Tomskey 2017, p. 14). "The global" as I use it in this article subverts this version of cosmopolitanism and globalization. Instead of turning to practices of provincialization, the global resists the globalized by "embrac[ing] multidirectional pathways and possibilities. . . adopting orientations that are decentered, multi-centered, and nonlinear" (Miranda 2021, p. 309). In the place of the binaries of center and margin, metropolis and colony focused as they are on national boundaries, the global enables us to look at more rhizomatic "intimacies", as Lisa Lowe would name it (Lowe 2015, p. 6). The Ballad, along with other literary forms, has become a key battleground for globalization in the tussle among several literary traditions with all their asymmetries.

3. Reading for the Global Ballad

While globalization is invested in the production of easily translatable national cultures, I argue that critical global studies holds the potential to draw rhizomatic connections across cultures and national boundaries with untranslatability as the foundation. As Katherine Bergren writes, "Global Romanticism is an overarching category that encompasses work on imperialism and slavery, but it is also its own field, one that increasingly focuses

on the long history of globalism, and that has been particularly energized by attempts to study how global thinking emerges in texts that are not ostensibly about imperialism, colonial encounter, abolition, or the institution of slavery” (Bergren 2021, p. 4). Reading the global Ballad in such a tradition would mean to acknowledge and account for the global interactions of folk and performance traditions. The English Ballad has interacted with several other ‘nationalist’ traditions of the Ballad within Europe and beyond. For instance, Jayne Winter outlines the impact of the German translation of Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* through Johann Gottfried Herder’s *Volkslieder* collections (1774–1779). They also demonstrate how Matthew Lewis “played on the explicitly translated and foreign character of his sources to create sensational effects and emphasize foreign difference” (Winter 2014, p. 22). Neither for Herder nor for Lewis was the chief concern about the Ballad its relation to history and the nation (Winter 2014, p. 24). Winter, however, maintains that the translations of ballads across national boundaries and their interactions aided the fashioning of their respective national identities against a carefully curated foreignness. This then leads to further interesting interactions among balladic traditions. They write, “The foreign-language Ballad is a source of inspiration because of the tension created when something which is notionally inward-facing and nationally specific is recreated in a different language” (Winter 2014, p. 37). The foreign-language Ballad in translation involves a level of exoticization in the process of fashioning national identities. The global Ballad, on the other hand, exceeds ethno-nationalistic desires to essentialize ballad traditions. One way to read for the global Ballad, I argue, is to critically read any given ballad within multiple traditions of ballad studies.

Accordingly, I focus on the interactions between the Tamil and English balladic traditions while being aware that a similar comparative reading of other balladic traditions would offer us a different sense of the global Ballad. As early as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Tamil and English ballads have interacted with and influenced each other. For instance, William Taylor, in his catalogue of ‘oriental manuscripts’ mentions Indian epics being sung on the streets in a “ballad style” (Taylor 1862, p. 150). Similarly, Constantino Giuseppe Beschi, a missionary, wrote *Kitheri Ammal Ammanai*, a Christian themed ballad in Tamil in the early eighteenth century. Such interactions and exchanges have continued across national and cultural lines for at least two hundred years before Ravi engages the form again. Beschi, for instance, was an Italian missionary who wrote in Tamil and was a scholar of other south-Asian and European languages such as Telugu, Sanskrit, French, Latin, Portuguese, Greek, and Hebrew. These global interactions of literary traditions help us bring a critical eye of specificity and translocalization to the nationalized and globalized Ballad that Ravi is offering us.

Among Tamil literary scholars, the Ballad is popularly known as *kathaipādal* (literally, “story-song”). As with the English Ballad, *kathaipādal* too has been characterized by its narrativization of a significant event, being accompanied by some form of performance, strong links to the past, circulation among country folk, incremental repetition, narrative symmetry, a tragic plot and tone, and a resistance to both print and single-authorship. N. Vānamāmalai notes that the *kathaipādal* is an outlier in the Tamil folkloric tradition. He writes, “Folk songs are intimately tied to country life. Except *kathaipādal*, all folk songs narrate the everyday incidents of country life” (translation mine) (Vānamāmalai 1964, p. 3). *Kathaipādal* for him narrates incidents that stand outside the everyday. They are narrative forms that help mediate the immediate, and he holds them to be primarily working-class literary products. He popularized the coinage ‘*kathaipādal*’ as an equivalent for the European Ballad form to refer to a variety of Tamil performance poetry such as *sindhu*, *ammānai*, *oppāri*, *kōthu*, *kummi*, *villu pāttu*, and more.

Kathaipādal, for R. Azhagarasan, however, is insufficient to account for the many different performance and narrative forms that populate Tamil cultural history. He sees ‘kathaipādal’ as an attempt to coin a Tamil word that can be used for the convenient comparative study of local folkloric performances with the English Ballad tradition. He writes, “Ballad studies in Tamil inevitably depend on the ballad criticism and theories of ballads formulated by Western scholars. This has resulted in the narrow aesthetic conclusions regarding the production and survival of these performance-traditions” (Azhagarasan 1995, p. 46). Though these ‘conclusions’ have fundamentally altered the nature of Tamil ballad studies, this interaction does not necessarily constrict the improvisational proliferation of the performance-tradition. For instance, K.A. Gunasekaran’s meticulously collected anthology of more recent urban Tamil ballads points to a continuing tradition that has not been stifled by the interaction between English ballad studies and Tamil ballad studies (Gunasekaran 2008). As Carlos Sabarimuthu points out, these ‘modern ballads’ are quite different from traditional ballads and “are short, usually sung for a few minutes and are composed on local marginal heroes” (Sabarimuthu 2012, pp. 52–53)¹³. The global Ballad, in this iteration, emerges as the result of a series of cross-cultural interactions with each other and the socio-political events of at least the last two centuries. The global Ballad is the result of the exchanges not fully controlled by keen national(istic) players and something that emerges with careful reading practices with specific attention to an alternative tradition that has continued to thrive in the undercommons of the (neo-)colonial insistence on national boundaries.

The global Ballad instead names a literary tradition that is the outcome of a trans-cultural fluidity that resists nationalistic claims. This ‘global’ in the ‘global Ballad’ that I am outlining here is what Edouard Glissant calls the ‘chaos-monde’. In *Poetics of Relation*, he writes, “*Chaos-monde* is neither fusion nor confusion: it acknowledges neither the uniform blend—a ravenous integration—nor muddled nothingness. . . But its hidden order does not presuppose hierarchies or pre-cellencies—neither of chosen languages nor of prince-nations” (Glissant 1997, p. 94). The global Ballad in that sense is resonant with Glissant’s poetics of relation that “senses, assumes, opens, gathers, scatters, continues, and transforms the thought of these elements, these forms, and this motion” (Glissant 1997, pp. 94, 95). While it has undergone and continues to undergo drastic formal changes, the global Ballad is useful to name that literary form that primarily is tragic in tone, a plot built around a heroic figure fighting injustice, invokes the oral and the historic(al), is outside the everyday, and is mnemonic. The individual writer-narrator is deemed marginal to the unfolding of the story, and instead, it is an imagined community that this narrative is taken to be an expression of. This characterization is true of the traditional Ballad too and the global in the ‘global Ballad’ is what we gloss through the circulation of balladic story-telling techniques and stories themselves across national borders in a way that decenters national borders. The reading practice it demands is one that reads the ballads as part of a larger literary corpus. The global Ballad emerges in the reader’s engagement of the literary product not as an atomistic, separable unit but as one that is in conversation with other ballads and more importantly different cultures of literary criticism.

Further, the global Ballad necessarily acknowledges archival discontinuities that resist the desire to impose a traceable long linear tradition. Instead, it engages what David Atkinson has called ‘ballad weight’. Atkinson elaborates the emphasis within ballad studies on continuity (Atkinson 2018) and outlines in its place a way to read ballads across different time periods without having to impose a neat evolutionary trajectory in the study of ballad history¹⁴. Atkinson instead proposes ‘ballad weight’ as a way to account for both the discontinuities in Ballad’s history but also its cumulative effect on and role in cultural memory. This liberates the Ballad from a teleological literary historiography founded on

cause and effect, continuity, and print-based material as predominant evidence. Atkinson remarks how his conceptualization of ballad weight helps see “the potential locked up in the textual and musical, material and social, history of the ballad itself” (Atkinson 2018, p. 22). The force of ballad weight, he argues, “might. . . be variously social. . . and aesthetic. . . It is a way of invoking an available connection with the past of the ballad itself and with the past of (real or imagined) history as the ballad presents it—the past *of* the ballad and the past *in* the ballad. . .” (Atkinson 2018, pp. 20–22). The global Ballad, in other words, acknowledges and accommodates opacity in its own historiography whereas the globalized Ballad is keen on drawing a through-line across centuries, effacing the uneasy, contradictory, and untranslatable parts.

4. Tragic Folk Hero and the Patriotic Martyr

R. Azhagarasan’s disagreement with N. Vānamāmalai comparison of the English and Tamil Ballad is a productive anchor point to read for the global Ballad and subvert the globalized Ballad. Such a reading adds rough seams that restrict an unbridled circulation of literary products fashioned within nationalist frameworks. It helps us resist what Lawrence Venuti would call ‘fluent translation’—one “that invisibly inscribe[s] foreign texts with British and American values and provide[s] readers with the narcissistic experience of recognizing their own culture in a cultural other” (Venuti 2008, p. 12). The untranslatability of Tamil performative forms that Azhagarasan draws our attention to helps us read the global Ballad as one that has emerged through interactions with the cultural other without wholesale assimilation.

Further, we could outline the process through which Ravi globalizes the Ballad form by turning to the mechanics of characterization that he undertakes in his poem. The exceptionality of character and their tragedy that the form’s convention demands are addressed right in the first stanza of the poem. In the prolog, he tells us, “The world is full of music,/If we listen quietly/We would hear some songs..[of]/Happy themes, yet sometimes/With a touch of melancholy” (Ravi 2022, p. 19). ‘The touch of melancholy’ that Ravi is referring to fashions and mediates the death of the protagonist through an event that we are to anticipate. The event, however, is itself going to be fashioned through the Ballad that frames the tragic death in a celebratory tone. That is to say, the event and the balladic hero are fashioned together and in relation to one another. The ballad begins by very briefly characterizing Kuyili as an ordinary young girl, enjoying the time she gets to spend with trees and birds (Ravi 2022, pp. 22–24). The everydayness of this girl sets the backdrop against which her abrupt leap into the exceptional could then be dramatically narrativized. This particular characterization is what then enables the paradoxical celebration of the extraordinary death of an ordinary young girl. The vitalism that propels and thrives, ironically in Kuyili’s death, and in the fight against colonial injustice helps frame a tragic loss as a “happy theme with a touch of melancholy” (Ravi 2022, p. 19).

Balladic characterization involves a specific set of extraordinary incidents related to the character, alongside an omission of everyday incidents. It is almost as if some Balladic characters do not engage in everyday tasks. So, much before we get to the event that defines the exceptionality of the hero, we have already started dissociating the character from the everyday. Hence, even as we get a brief glimpse into her everydayness, Kuyili’s birth, childhood, the games she played, the friends she had, or what she learnt, are all missing in the character we get. In other words, Ravi’s ballad offers us no bildungsroman for Kuyili. It is almost as if she were always destined to become the event that later defines her. This retrospective construction of the balladic character is in line with the exceptionality that the event demands. This exceptionalization of the character enables the establishment of an explanation for why an event as exceptional could then take place. The elusive event

that is the fountainhead of the ensuing riots is explained by lodging it within the mystical courage of the Balladic hero. The event fundamentally resists teleology and narrativization, and it is precisely that causation that Balladic characterization folds the event into, as we see in Ravi's ballad as well.

Even the ordinariness of Kuyili that is being constructed at the beginning of the plot is already exceptional. In Canto 1, Kuyili is sitting by a brook and recognizes the "grand orchestra" that the different sounds of nature are constituting. "A lark or a cuckoo" is pouring forth its "agony and ecstasy" in a typical Romantic setting, and Kuyili, as a stock Wordsworthian figure, is "Reading page by page" "The open Book of Nature". She expresses her own 'deficiency' when she is talking to the cuckoo and says "Both of us are dark in skin/But have a spark within!" (Ravi 2022, pp. 22, 23). Her simplicity, we note, is not established through the everyday where she is performing mundane tasks. Her simplicity is a specific English Romantic version that in fact sets the character apart from the everyday, trained by and in nature. In her simplicity too, Kuyili is presented as exceptional. We see the stark difference in Balladic characterization from novel characterization that by and large locates the character in the everyday. It is from this exceptional simplicity that Kuyili is propelled into the stature of the folk hero in the context of the detonation of the armory and the uprising that follows.

However, this exceptional Balladic character is presented in Ravi's poem as a patriotic martyr in the place of the tragic folk hero that the local versions offer. Stuart Blackburn holds that "the folk hero is one who protects what the folk group values and/or challenges what the group devalues" (Blackburn 1978, p. 131). This 'value system' is one of the features through which Ravi 'nationalizes' Kuyili. Kuyili in the folklore versions is embedded in the local ethos, an inextricable part of which is the caste she is born into and the caste of the others she engages with. Caste system has appeared in mainstream nationalistic discourse as a unique millennia-old social setup worthy of celebration, or a peculiarity that is not too antithetical to the imagined community that India is, or has entirely been erased.

This setting, world(view)—specifically the caste system—and the character's embeddedness in this is a central part of what's radically rewritten in Ravi's ballad. The local folk versions of Kuyili lay heavy emphasis on her caste position and also hint at her transcendence of the same. Kuyili's suicide, the event, is narrativized within a long Tamil folk tradition of suicide as a political statement. Vānamāmalai notes that since the village economy was centered around the temple, the temple is often the site of these politically directed suicides. The audience of the earlier folk tradition would locate and contextualize Kuyili's suicide bombing of the British armory in the Kalayar temple, within this particular tradition. Vānamāmalai notes that we see several such suicides with a clearly political edge referenced both in folklore and stone inscriptions. Such suicides can popularly be seen in cases where there were attempts to confiscate lands that belonged to the temple—a different form of the commons. These 'public' suicides were political acts of the marginalized caste people that were meant to register dissent. The context could be feudal landowners trying to confiscate common land, or as in our case, the British trying to radically redefine land equations and wages. Vānamāmalai writes, "A stone inscription discovered in Nanjai, Thanjavur says that a few temple employees immolated themselves and sacrificed their lives in the temple premises to assert that the lands belonged to the temple" (translation mine) (Vānamāmalai 1964, p. 13). Such suicides—by jumping off the temple's tower, or self-immolation—are popular in Tamil folklore and are integral to the Tamil ballad tradition as expressions of political discontent and resistance.

In the earlier ballads, the event and Kuyili are narrativized within this tradition of political suicides, and specifically immolations. Female immolations have been located within the practice of sati too and women dying through this practice are sometimes

worshiped as goddesses. *Theepainja Amman* (trans. Fire-leapt goddess) is found across different places in Tamil Nadu. We find one such temple for Queen Velu Nachiar in the district of Cuddalore to whom, in this case, Kuyili's 'suicide bombing' is attributed. It is this discourse within which Kuyili as a character and event is conceptualized in the local versions of folklore that continue to circulate widely even today. In these versions, the event is narrativized within a religious framework. The nature of Kuyili's death within this tradition enables us to see her transcendence of her caste position by becoming a divine figure. This divination enables Kuyili to overcome the impurity that the caste system associates with her body. Azhagarasan notes that "In both cases [the case of lower caste people and women] their social position and oppression is determined by the mere fact of their being born in a peculiar community/caste or gender, i.e., in terms of the position of their bodies signifying impurity" (Azhagarasan 1995). Kuyili's suicide, drawing from the rich tradition of women—specifically lower caste women—and transcending her caste, in some ways, through a divinatory process, is central to the local version of folklore. Otherwise caught up in what Azhagarasan identifies as the 'caste-bound subject' in folklore, Kuyili's engagement with fire through her body helps her renarrativize her relation to the caste system as well. Kuyili's suicide, the event-as-Kuyili, in folklore, characterizes her as an anti-caste figure much more than a patriotic national figure of the freedom struggle.

Ravi's ballad globalizes this tradition of local balladic narration primarily by reconfiguring the terms of the event, and the Balladic hero's relation to the event. The Kuyili that self-immolates in the local folklore liberating herself—partially at least—from the gendered caste system through a process of divination becoming a goddess, in Ravi's globalized Ballad is a patriotic martyr. The event of the armory being blown up and the exceptionality of Kuyili's character is narrativized similarly in both the local and the globalized versions.

However, Kuyili's relation to the riots, her transformation through it and her relation to Queen Nachiar and India as a nation are radically redefined. Kuyili, as we discussed earlier, is clearly fashioned as an ordinary, simple girl. She meets the Queen once and immediately asks herself: "Is she not my destiny, my/Queen Majesty?/Is this not the moment for me to/Prove my loyalty?" (Ravi 2022, p. 44). Loyalty to the queen and through her to the nationalist cause becomes her *raison d'être*. Soon after this first meeting, she takes the ceremonial pledge of loyalty as well. Kuyili formulates a strategy to overcome the disproportionate power of weaponry they realize the British have. She sings the anthem and people sing along. Right before the suicide bombing, the narrator tells us that Kuyili remembers her father's words: "All your prayers will be heard./Fight for justice, fight for freedom,/He will come and lead you,/Holding you by hand/To save your Motherland." (Ravi 2022, pp. 70–71). Kuyili, in this version, is rendered loyal to Queen Nachiar and the patriotic cause, with no mention at all of her caste position or her attempt to transcend that through the suicide bombing into a goddess. A local hero, and at times a goddess, becomes a patriotic martyr in this globalized version, as someone who sacrificed her life for her nation, which is presented without any of its internal social contradictions that would otherwise undercut the nation's collective coexistence. If the characterization in the local Ballad highlights her defiance of the caste order, the globalized Ballad highlights her loyalty to the nation, at the cost of her anti-caste resistance. A tragic folk hero is thus transformed into a patriotic martyr in Ravi's ballad.

5. Global Ballad and the Politics of Difference

In Ravi's ballad, the untranslatability of the local worldview of the folk hero is replaced with a neo-nationalist framework. Resistance to a nodal point in interlocked systems of oppression becomes merely patriotic anti-colonialism. This transformation of the tragic folk hero into a patriotic martyr recognizable in the global theater of nation-states completes the

globalization of the Ballad. Caste erasure enables this version of balladic character that also constructs a homogenous India that at best acknowledges non-contradictory and neatly assimilated cultural difference. Ravi's ballad also alters the context of the riots within which Kuyili is read. The globalized Ballad emerges in the context of contemporary riots and alongside historical riots being nationalized and made available for wider consumption by resolving or sidelining the inner contradictions that make up several imagined communities. Though the tendency to resist an increasingly globalized literary culture has been to fall back on the other side of this constructed binary—the local, this article has outlined a way to differentiate the global Ballad from the globalized Ballad. Taking the setting (which includes the geographical location but more importantly the specific value system) of the ballad, characterization, and the narrativization of an event as key characteristics of the Ballad, the global Ballad calls for a reading practice that does not sever literary artifacts from the cultures of literary criticism within which they function. The global Ballad acknowledges opacity and untranslatability as integral parts of literature and literary historiographies, even as it approaches cultural and literary difference through a radical, fluid interconnectedness. Such a reading practice would also then resist a commodified circulation of 'domesticated' Anglophone riots through the circuits of the globalized capitalist market.

This method of reading for the global Ballad offers us only portions of the "full story", or "story-song" as Vānamāmalai would have it. It requires a collaborative, global effort to add more sections to this story that would then force us to rewrite the politics of balladic, folkloric exchange among different traditions. This constant process of revisiting literary traditions as a scholarly practice offers its own potential in our attempts to counter neo-nationalist storytelling that often seeks to freeze identities, cultures, and traditions in time across regions. Neo-nationalist storytelling, along with globalization, demands homogenization through the violent translation or erasure of cultural opacities. Demonstrating a possibility and the need to tarry with untranslatable yet relational difference, 'global ballad' as an oxymoronic phrase offers a literary tension that is ultimately a promise of a politics of difference.

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Notes

- ¹ The Indian constitution defines India as a "Union of States" and organizes the government structure on the principles of federalism. Accordingly, the Union government, sometimes referred to as the central government, manages national affairs and policies affecting the entire country, whereas the state governments handle governance and administration concerning their individual states.
- ² Others who have questioned her historical veracity include renowned historian K. Rajayyan (Rajayyan 2021), and writer A. Vennila (The Hindu 2025). On the other hand, scholars such as R. Kaleeswaran, and R. Lenin criticize the limitations of approaching this question through written records alone, and argue that various folk songs and stories in Tamil point to Kuyili's existence (The Hindu 2022).
- ³ Alongside her historical veracity, her sub-caste identity has also been the subject of fierce debate (See for instance Muthu 2014).
- ⁴ Some others include *Warrior Queen of Sivaganga: The Legend of Rani Velu Nachiyar* (Shubendra 2023) and *Velu Nachiyar: Penmaiyyin Paeraanmai* (Seyon 2020).

- 5 For Romanticist scholars' recent engagement with and contribution to critical global studies, see *Global Romanticism: Origins, Orientations, and Engagements, 1760–1820* (Gottlieb 2015), *Brown Romantics: Poetry and Nationalism in the Global Nineteenth Century* (Chander 2017), and *Romantic Literature and the Colonised World: Lessons from Indigenous Translations* (Hessell 2018).
- 6 Even historians like K. Rajayyan, who have meticulously reworked the history of the Indian anti-colonial struggles, mention Velu Nachiar and the female warriors only in passing (Rajayyan 1971, p. 77).
- 7 Formerly referred to as the untouchable caste, 'Dalit' today signifies a strong political and social identity fashioned around shared histories of caste-based discrimination in South Asia and beyond. For an interesting global expansion of this category, see Yengde (2022).
- 8 N. Vānamāmalai is one of the earliest scholars of South India to systematically collect, anthologize, and study Tamil Nadu's folklore. He is often regarded as the 'father of Tamil folklore'.
- 9 For a more detailed account of this relation between the ballad form, history, and the past, see *The Ballad and Its Pasts: Literary Histories and the Play of Memory* (Atkinson 2018).
- 10 For a different take on the question of class and ballads, see "John Rastell's Dramatic Ballad and the Early Tudor Court: Toward a Revised Understanding of Ballad History" (Lillo 2020).
- 11 Other prominent protests in India in the years leading up to Ravi's ballad's publication include the Nation-wide protests following the suicide of a Dalit research scholar, Rohith Vemula (2016), Anti-NEET protests in Tamil Nadu following the suicide of Anita, a Dalit student (2017), the Bhima Koregaon riots (2018), and the farmers' protest (2020). In all these protests we see female and 'aged' bodies, and the suicide (or as several activists hold it—'institutional murder') of Dalits, come to the fore with regard to the question of national belonging with a renewed intensity.
- 12 For a recent controversy surrounding the use of the name 'Bharat' to refer to India, see Aljazeera (2023).
- 13 For a detailed discussion of the different approaches within Tamil Ballad studies in defining the Ballad form see Azhagarasan (1995).
- 14 For a detailed account of a popular evolutionary approach to ballads see Sharp (1907).

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