

## Dwelling in Futures Past: Place, Region and Tamil Nation in Ra. Krsnamurti's *Civakamiyin Capatam*

Akhila Ramnarayan  
PhD Candidate, Department of English  
Writing Center Assistant Coordinator & Writing Across the Curriculum Consultant  
Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing  
The Ohio State University

“Only when I wrote *Partiban Kanavu* and *Civakamiyin Capatam* did I realise how much Tamil people today desire to know about the prestige of the ancient Tamil regions,” writer-nationalist “Kalki” Ra. Krsnamurti reveals in the 1948 preface to his 1944 historical romance *Civakamiyin Capatam* (Civakami’s Vow). His three Tamil language novels depicting the medieval south Indian kingly dynasties of the Pallavas (500-800 CE) and Colas (800-1279 CE) – *Partiban Kanavu* (1941), *Civakamiyin Capatam* (1944) and *Ponniyin Celvan* (1950)—have made him (and the historical and fictional characters he assembled) a household name among Tamil audiences. I explore in this paper how *Civakamiyin Capatam*—a fictional love story about Pallava monarch Narasimhavaraman (630-668) and the fictional court dancer Civakami told against the backdrop of the Pallava-Chalukya wars—navigates the searing, often-contradictory, ethnic, linguistic, and regional tensions surrounding the creation of an exclusively Tamil identity in the 1940s, invoking a spiritual past in the construction of Tamil place, home, and nation. Using the historical romance as a lens with which to examine erstwhile formulations of Tamil identity (Indian nationalist and colonial rhetorics; Dravidian political separatism and anti-brahmanism; the *tanitamil* (separate Tamil) language purity and *suya mariyatei* (self-respect) movements; the resurgence of *Saiva Siddhanta* religious tenets; the advent of theosophy in Tamilnadu; and Tamil *marumalarcci* or cultural renaissance), I argue that Krsnamurti’s novelistic writing sketched a cultural and political canvas against which competing and complementary ideals of a new regionalist consciousness could emerge, signaling a new kind of interventionist literature in the Tamil instance.

Krsnamurti’s fictionalisation of the Pallava and the Cola periods is traceable to his nationalistic aspirations, his desire to develop a distinctive Tamil presence in Indian literary and political history, and to resurrect pride in *tamilakam* (home of the Tamils). In *Civakamiyin Capatam*, he re-enacts the cultural and spiritual awakening that must accompany nationalistic sentiment by invoking secular/sacred texts and contexts, and pan-religious mythologies and symbols. Tamil language and literature, sculpture and painting, song and dance, are depicted in the novel as living traditions to be nurtured by the state. The Pallava capital Kancipuram emerges as an idealised public sphere characterised by a benevolent monarch promoting a high intellectual, religious and philosophical dialogue, a flourishing literary and artistic scene, and a free citizenry. Through such depictions, Krsnamurti’s novel/s provided an ideological-spiritual bulwark—distinctively Tamil—against which a new middle-class could imagine its own identity.

My paper also investigates how casteist/nationalist assumptions about and constructions of Hindu India problematise Krsnamurti’s versions of history and influence perceptions of his role and status among Tamil audiences. Not unlike twentieth-century brahmin scholar U. V. Caminata Iyer and brahmin nationalist poet Cupirama Bharati before him, Krsnamurti is thus conditionally embraced by non-brahmin politicians, writers and scholars for his efforts in Tamil identity formation. For instance, through his unconventional characterization of the dancer-protagonist Civakami, Krsnamurti allegedly took on the task of popularising the traditional dance form of *Sadir* or *Bharata Natyam*, fallen into disrepute among brahmanical elites in colonial India. Such characterizations brought on allegations that Krsnamurti tailored his aesthetic to suit brahmin sensibilities, values, and tastes, and that his novels were complicit in the brahmanisation of Tamil literature and culture. However, his versions of Pallava and Cola empire still provide a cultural and political standard by which Tamil brahmin and nonbrahmin readers measure and mark their society’s achievement.

Through this cellular investigation of Krsnamurti’s novelistic practice, I ask how *Civakamiyin Capatam* reconciled a retreat into the religious past with regionalist loyalties and secular democratic ideals for an independent Indian nation. At a time when India’s independence and the violence of Partition were imminent, when regionalist and religious divides were being strenuously overridden in Indian nationalist discourse, the questions Krsnamurti raised through his historical romances about history, religion, and language as viable frameworks with which to imagine nation galvanised an emergent Tamil readership. Even in his most contested invocations of ancient and medieval pasts,

**Dwelling in Futures Past: Place, Region and Tamil Nation in Ra. Krsnamurti's *Civakamiyin Capatam***

Krsnamurti implied to Tamil audiences that the road to a broader conceptualization of place, race and nation leads first to region and home. I hope to nuance and problematize through this paper scholarly understandings of the Tamil instance in today's proliferating contexts of Hindu fundamentalism and Tamil nationalism, affording comparatist explorations of place and home across South Asia's regions while challenging literary-critical models in postcolonial studies based solely on literatures in English.