

AKALIKAI IN MODERN TAMIL LITERATURE

A Feminist View

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Introduction

The practice of adapting ancient/traditional stories prevalent in society and creating new stories by adding or omitting certain aspects has existed for a long time. The writers fusion new stories by accepting or rejecting the concepts and practices of the traditional story according to the social environment of their times. Such stories usually touch the society's emotions and enlighten or express its views. Certain stories of this nature are recreated with novel ideas and structures. One such story is that of **Alalikai**.

The Story of Akalikai.

In modern Tamil literature-comprising of poetry, modern Tamil blank verse, novel, short story and drama- the influence and popularity of the **Ramayana** is really considerable. It may be said that there is no modern Tamil writer who has not created new works in which they have given new dimensions or interpretations to some **Ramayana** character or incident. This shows to what extent the **Ramayana** serves the modern creative writers as the fountain of their imagination and the unending source of stories to be retold.

Akalikai is one character from the epic who has attracted very much, the attention of the Tamil creative writers of the 20th century. These reformative writers seem to have felt great compassion for her and were touched by her story. This is evident from the fact that her story or discussed most when compared to other characters or stories of the **Ramayana**.

The story of **Akalikai** is a sub-story in the epics of **Valmiki** and **Kampan**. According to **Dr. K.Kailasapathy** this story is prior to even **Valmiki** for it is found in the **Vedas** and the **Brahmanas**.(1) The name **Ahalya** is used in the **Vedas**; the meaning given is brightness.(2) **Halyam** in Sanskrit means fault and **a-halya** means a woman without any fault. **Brahma** gave this name to the daughter he created to mean that she is faultless.(3)

Akalikai is the wife of **Sage Gautama**. Falling prey to the devious plot of **Indra**, her chastity is blemished. So she faces the anger of **Gautama** who curses her to become a rock. Later, she attained her original form when **Rama** passed that way and the dust from his feet touched her. This basic story is narrated by **Valmiki** and **Kampan** in the some variations. The former relates that **Akalikai** knew that it was **Devendra** who approached her and happily consented to the union. Thus she is shown as one who erred knowingly and hence faces the anger of the sage who pronounces the curse. But according to **Kampan's** version, she did not know the true identity of the man who had come (with the form of her husband). She realized that it was not her husband only during the union but was not able to withdraw. In the poets' words, "Even when

she realized, she did not think it was improper” and hence she was turned to a stone. Thus **Akalikai** as depicted by **Kampan** is one who erred unknowingly and therefore not deviated from the path of feminine chastity. Looking at this from a social point of view, it denotes male-domination based on the idea that man is naturally superior and the woman is dependent on him. During that period a man’s digressions however great were overlooked, while those of women even when committed unknowingly were considered serious, deserving punishment. **Kampan** who lived in such a social environment must have had compassion and respect for womanhood. Surely this is the reason he depicts **Akalikai** as one who erred unknowingly. In this way, **kampan** has the distinction of being the first Tamil writer to modify **Valmiki’s** depiction of **Akalikai**. The feminist views and ideas commonly discussed in contemporary Tamil literature seem to have germinated in **Kampan** himself.

Modern Tamil Literature and Creative Writers.

One of the main trends in modern Tamil literature is to voice the degrading state of women caught in the grip of male domination. Today, any genre of Tamil literature holds the discussion or depiction of the problems faced by women as its chief aim. Most of the writers are involved in the fight for justice and rights for women at every level. They also depict women characters who have been affected by male domination in a feminist light, thereby revealing new ideas. This is why many Tamil writers of the present age view **Akalikai** as a woman who had suffered unjustly due to male domination. Hence they have approached her story from a different point of view and recreated it so as to bring out contemporary feminist views. In their re-telling, they differ and even are opposed to **Valmiki** and **Kampan**.

Contemporary Tamil writers have set out to show that **Akalikai** was chaste mentally and physically. So they have changed the manner in which her chastity came to be considered blemished. They have even changed her character in order to give her a new form suitable for this new age. The basic cause for all this is the rise of thoughts and ideas in the twentieth century regarding gender discrimination and the subjection of women. The authors who have treated the story of **Akalikai** in the light of such an influence are as follows:-

Akalikai in Poems

- i) *Akalikai Venba* (V.P. Subramania Mudaliar)
- ii) *Ahalya Kurunkaviyam* (Sa.Tu.Su.Yogiar)
- iii) *Ahalya Kaviyam* (T.T. Meera)
- iv) *Karkani* (Kambadasan)
- v) *Akalikai* (Elattu Mahakavi)

Akalikai in Blank Verses

- i) *Uyirmakal* (Na.Pitchamoorthy)
- ii) *Kallikai* (Nyani)
- iii) *Akalikai Innamum Kattirukkiral* (Cirpi)
- iv) *Raman Parvayil Akalikai* (Cirpi)
- v) *Avatara Purusan* (Vali)
- vi) *Vellai Yanai* (Muruga Sundaran)
- vii) *Oru Kallin Kataiyum Kaviyin Vimarcanamum* (Mu.Mehta)
- viii) *Akalikai* (M.A. Ilanchelvan - Malaysia)
- ix) *Akalikai* – Rabindranath Tagore(Translated by Ta.Na.Kumarasamy)

Akalikai in Novel

- i) *Kotai Tivu* (V. Ramasamy Iyengar)

Akalikai in Short Stories

- i) *Akalikai* (Putumaippittan)
- ii) *Capavimocanam* (Putumaippittan)
- iii) *Kodari* (M.V. Vengadram)
- iv) *Masaru Karpinal* (Pe.Ko.Sundararajan)
- v) *Papamum Capamum* (Ti.Ke. Sreenivasan)

Akalikai in Cinema

- i) *Cati Ahalya* (Salem Modern Theatres)

Akalikai in Drama

- i) *Akalikai* (Ku.Pa. Rajagopalan)
- ii) *Akalikai Natakam* (A.R.Rajagopala Chetiar)
- iii) *Akalikai Natakam* (Pirapancan)
- iv) *Ahalya- Tuvijendralal* (Translated by Pandit B.Mahalingam)

Of these, only the creations of a few (chosen according to the literary forms/genre) are discussed in this paper. Their narration of the story of **Akalikai**, their variations from **Valmiki** and **Kampan** and the reasons for such variance are discussed for each author/work.

Ahalya Kurunkaviyam (Short Epic of Ahalya) by Sa.Tu.Su. Yogyar.

This is a short epic in about 496 lines of poetry. It relates her story from childhood to the time she is reunited with **Gautama** after her release from the curse. It contains six sub-divisions, namely **Arapam** (Beginning), **Tirumanam** (Marriage) **Karpuk Kanal** (the Fire of Chastity), **Soodchi** (Plot), **Meedchi** (Release) and **Mudivu** (Conclusion). These, based on the main events of the story are densely knitted to make it an organic plot. Now, we may examine how **Yogyar** varies from **Valmiki** and **Kampan** and the reason for doing so.

1. **Kampan's** epic does not contain any details about **Akalikai's** birth or early life. Neither does it mention **Indra's** love for her in her youths. But these are found in some Sanskrit works. **Yogyar** with his knowledge of Sanskrit, utilizes such uniformities for his introductory section **Arapam** (beginning).
2. In the second section **Tirumanam** (Marriage). He deals briefly with her marriage and expresses his own views on the incompatibility of the couple. Even though **Gautama** wins the contest held by Brahma to choose a bridegroom for **Akalikai**, **Indra** who lost is considered more suitable. So **Yogyar** sings vehemently.

Did your father, the embodiment of truth give you – a lightning.
 To him who came thus, cheating in the contest?
 Did not the Lord of the devas prevent thus evil act?
 Did the unaging *Trimurtis* faint?
 O bewildering beauty, like a freshly opened bud!
 Has your dream been pierced and shattered To a hundred pieces?
 Did each mantra becoming a shackle become
 The sentence to imprison yours beauty and works?
 Did the slip-knot of the *tali* around your neck
 Cause a deep sleep like the sleep on the gallows?(4)

3. In the third section, *Karpuk Kanai* (The Fire of Chastity) too, **Yogiyar** differs from the epics. Before arriving in the guise of **Gautama**, **Indra** is shown as meeting **Akalikai**. He declares his love, explains the pains of longing desire and begs her to give in to desire. At that instance, **Akalikai** appears as the flame of feminine purity. She repudiates him and replies with vehement, harsh words. At that moment she seems to be an aspect of the fierce **Kali** (or **Durga**) herself.

She heard all that; did she lose her greatness?
 She stared hard, she, like the wind blowing at the end of the world.
 Her forehead perspiring, she stood like fire.
 Chest heaving, mind agitated, lips quivering
 Looks fuming, she went her fury in angry speech.
 Whom did you say? You corrupt, senseless one!
 You ask for betel leaves without knowing its root!
 I am the fire of chastity, you are a tiny worm of lust!
 A dog, have you come to speak to me of love?

 Would you know the wisdom of chastity that swells and grows?
Indra, Chandra ! Whoever it be, what matters that to me?

 Did you think of me as a harlot, you senseless one?
 To whom are you unfolding all these stories? Say this
 To your harlots – **Urvasi** and **Menaka**; thus she spoke in anger and hatred.

 You are the king of the heavens; have you no shame? You have lost.
 Your wisdom and become the king of the soreness of lust.(5)

4. In *Soodche* (plot) the fourth section, **Yogiyar** deals with **Indra's** arrival as **Gautama** and his union with **Akalikai**. Here too this author varies from **Valmiki** and **Kampan**. **Valmiki** by showing that **Akalikai** accepted **Indra's** advances knowing who he was, depicts her as being blemished both mentally and physically. **Kampan** by saying that she was ignorant of **Indra's** identity but realized the truth only during their union, pictures her as being blemished physically only but not mentally. **Yogiyar**, however, changes the incident further to show her as being faultless and pure. The following lines stress this.

“My husband has great desire as never before.
 Today I have enjoyed intense pleasure”
 Thus thinking I have consented.(6)

The author stresses her total purity in the last section *Mudivu* (conclusion) through the words of **Rama**.

Without the slightest fault she was blamed! What a pity!
How does physical blemish come without mental blemish?

.....
She saw you with her eyes, she did not see the King of the *devas*.
She accepted you in her mind, not the King of the *devas*.
She embraced you with her body; she did not touch him.(7)

At the point of the story where the curse is pronounced on **Akalikai**, the author expresses further his feminist ideas.

The lady who stood by *dharma* has fallen; those who killed at live.
With the arrogance of their ability (and garb) they have erred.
The lover destroyed her conjugal purity and the husband her dignity.
The people of the world despised the queen of ladies as a harlot.(8)

Thus he reiterates that **Akalikai** had led a life of purity. The fact that **Indra** and **Gautama** continued to live without any sense of guilt shows the height of male domination. It is shown that through such men even good women, like **Akalikai**, are subject to suffering and even disgrace.

5. **Mudivu**(Conclusion), the final part contains a conversation between **Rama** and **Gautama**. **Yogiyar** has again voiced new ideas, contrary to the traditional views. When **Gautama** says " Though the curse has left but not the sin" **Rama** bursts out in anger:

You are a liar, a cheat, a false teacher of *dharma*
You have slandered unnecessarily a true and lovely goddess.
If you argue, " She was deceived; isn't it wrong?" You
If you a sage knowing the past, present and future is deceived.
Is it a wonder that she was deceived then by her love for you?
You were subject to deceit; the *deva* deceived you.
But your wife without any sin bears the blame. Oh God!
Whose fault is it? It is yours and his; The greatness
Of the virtuous lady is not blemished; you have sinned in anger.(9)

B. **Avatara Purushan-an Epic in Modern Tamil Blank verse by Vali.**

The **Ramayana** story has been seeing in simple language by **Vali**. This epic in Modern Tamil blank verse entitled **Avatara Purushan** was serialized in the **Ananda Vikadan**. Here the author has related briefly the story of **Akalikai** in 200 lines. It is notable that all events relating to her are mentioned here.

The influence of **Valmiki** and **Yogiyar** are evident in the sequence of the events narrated. Details of **Akalikai's** birth, beauty, the competition among the *devas* to win her and the like, not mentioned by **Kampan** but found in Sanskrit works, are used by **Vali**.

Even the sun who lights up the day
will be a little clay-lamp in her presence.(10)

But she is depicted as flawless in mind and body even after her union with **Indra**.

The lady thought that it was her husband;
She buried herself in (his) embracing arms.(11)

Vali's characterization of **Akalikai** resembles that of **Yogiyar**. He too depicts her exercising her right to speak capable of arguing her case. This also shows that the author is supportive of the contemporary view

that women who nurture the welfare of the family needs freedom of speech. This is clear in her arguments with her husband who curses her to become a stone. She asks in anger, but with clear reasoning:-

This
Is not the fault of the woman.
It is the fault of the eye that failed to detect
The guise a mean man took as (my) husband.

After thinking it is my husband
How can my physical union
Be my fault.

When a sinner crowed like a cock-
You left at once to bathe.
That is your fault.

Like me weren't you too
Deceived by **Indra**?

You should punish yourself for your error
Before punishing me for mine.(12)

It has been discussed earlier how in **Yogyar's** work **Rama** points out that **Gautama** too has erred. But here, **Akalikai** herself holds him as the accused and argues for herself. This suggests the possible influence of **Yogyar** on **Vali**. The argument that the husband should have punished himself before punishing her, reminds us of **Mahakavi Bharathiyar's Pancali** who argues.

After my lords had lost themselves- they have
No right to give me away.(13)

Such argument put forth by these authors through **Akalikai** serve to bombard the fortress of male domination.

C. Akalikai portrayed by the novel *Kotai Tivu*.

This novel was written by **Va. Ramasamy Iyengar, Va. Ra** for short. He is a contemporary of **Mahakavi Bharathiyar** and is one of the few novelists who produced quality novels during the years 1900-1930. It may be noted that these years form the second period in the history of Tamil Novels, considered to be the **Dark ages** of the Tamil Novel. His novels contains ideas on social reform. One such is **Kotai Tivu** with valuable ideas for the advance neat of women. He himself states his purpose clearly.

"Through this fiction **kotai Tivu**, I have tried to show my brethren, the men what women would say and do, if they get the opportunity and courage to speak out. This should not be regarded as mere imagination.(14)

Chapter 17 of this novel depicts drama staged at a college. Entitled, "**Who is the accused?**", it is a drama of only one scene at the judicial court. In the presence of the Goddess of Justice the case of **Akalikai** is brought up. The jurors are **Sita, Vidura, Mary**

Magdalene, Andal and **Mahakavi Bharathiyar** in whose presence **Gautama, Brahma, Akalikai** and **Indra** are cross-examined. During this trial **Akalikai** speaks frankly. She accuses **Gautama** for marrying

her without any interest in marital relations, father **Brahma** for giving her in marriage to such a man. She argues that in such circumstances, her union with **Indra** for the gratification of marital pleasures cannot be wrong. She continues,

Rather than living like a woman and ruining femininity, it gives me great happiness to remain a stone forever. But I do not like becoming a woman again at the touch of the dust of **Sri Rama's** feet. Am I to go back to my father? Stay with the Sage of penance? Or live with **Indra** experiencing the pleasures? I have been a stone Without any rules or decisions; why should I become a woman?(15)

Indirectly the author highlights the degrading status of contemporary women. His depiction of **Akalikai** seems different from those of **Valmiki** and **Kampan**. "No one who has recreated the story of **Akalikai** with a new perspective has shown this clearly her feelings after the disappointments she had faced in her life"¹⁸ At the end of the trial, **Vidura** as the Chief Juror identifies **Gautama** as the wrong-door. As such Va. Ra is the first author to bring **Gautama** to trial, find him guilty and mete out punishment.

Besides, this author has in this novel, changed the traditional **Neeti-devan** to **Neeti-devi**. Such changes are made as a result of regarding woman, especially **Akalikai** with has love for humanity.

D. **Akalikai portrayed by the Short Story *Capa Vimocanam*.**

This story in 19 pages is one of the best short stories of Puthumaippitthan. It reveals the maturity, richness and depth of his imagination, thoughts and emotions. Here, he uses the narration as in the *Kampa Ramayana*.

In the *Ramayana* of **Valmiki** and **kampan**. The story of **Akalikai** ends with the removal of the curse and her reunion with her husband. But in this story, the author creates a sequel to the original **Ramayana** incidents.

According to it, fear and worry trouble **Akalikai** after the removal of the curse. She was unable to forget the disgrace caused by **Indra**. Life became hell to her. The reproach and contempt of those around further add to her torture. Even after fourteen years of such a life, she becomes mentally agitated on hearing of **Sita's** ordeal by fire to establish her purity. **Gautama** believes that only a child can help her overcome this state. But she is reminded of **Indra** approaching her in the guise of **Gautama**. So she lies in his arms, frigid in heart and body.

Here, **Putumaippitthan** has presented new insights by keeping the *Itihasa* story of **Akalikai** without any adaptation or alterations. He himself expresses this in his introduction "It was possible to design a different design (for the *kolam*)(16) What was his purpose in offering these new perspectives? To him, **Akalikai** seems to be a woman faultless at heart but had to bear the full burden of blame and disgrace. It may be said this sequel is the result of his sympathy for the piteous condition of women echo faced deceit, injustice and cruelty in the male-dominating Indian society. Besides **T.Murukaratnam** notes that the group of people who have been hurt or spurned by society are **Putumaippitthan's** favorite characters.(17)

It is also possible that he wrote this story because he felt that the removal of the curse was not the end of her marital problem. The struggles faced in daily life by those who get back to society after committing crimes and facing due punishment is well-known to all. So is the welcome according to them by relatives, friends and neighbours. This story is the result of the author's imagination of **Akalikai** in such a situation and feeling that this is how the unfortunate incident would have affected her. To be specific, he has depicted

the problems faced by women who have lost their feminine purity, knowingly or unknowingly. The author says,

This net of distress again? The mind did not ponder then,
on what life would be after liberation from the curse. But
now it encircles her life like a gigantic wall. Her heart too
is bewildered.(18)

This explains the purpose of the story.

Conclusion

In the light of the four works considered above, the following deductions may be arrived at.

1. **Valmiki** and **Kampan** used the story of **Akalikai** as a matter of individual virtue and the limitless compassion of God that forgives and graces the wrong-doers. They have narrated it without any thought or word to even suggest that **Gautama** could have erred. They saw him as a great sage; but in the fall of **Akalikai** they saw only feminine weakness and fickle behavior.
2. Contemporary writers have a new outlook and speak of women's rights and liberation. So they have changed and contradicted the epic writers so as to present the story in a new light.
3. Of all the characters in the **Ramayana**, **Akalikai** is the one who has attracted the attention of the modern writers. Thus is not incidental. The strength gained by feminism in society provided a suitable background to review the story of **Akalikai** who was badly affected by male domination. So many taking it, dusted it and treated according to the prevailing trend of thought.
4. These modern writers do not view the story as a matter of individual virtue or **dharmā**; they see it as a social problems. To them it is a symbol of the degradation caused by men in their frenzy for power and domination, at a certain period of time.
5. Through, this story these writers have tried to change the situation where men possessed the power to consider women as objects of sexual gratification who may be utilized, degraded, cursed to take a different form or scorch her feelings and emotions.
6. These writers have shown the **Indra** raped her. They blame **Brahma**, **Narada** and **Gautama** as having been the cause for it. Of these three **Gautama** is pointed at as the most guilty because they show that he married **Akalikai** by deceit. So he is depicted as one to be despised and finding him guilty, punish him.
7. The modern writer have also shown great interest in her life after being free from the curse. Besides, the relationship between her and **Gautama** the reaction of society towards her are also examined. The foremost of such writers is **Putumaippitthan** who puts forward a psychological reason for her frigidity.
8. As such **Akalikai** is a representative of the numerous women affected by the dominance of the male at a particular period of time. These writers have acted believing that when her story is re-treated with prominence, giving weight and depth to her characters and gaining justice for her, affected women may be able to see the end of the tunnel.
9. In short, to stress the fact that women should be respected and have rights equivalent to those of men, **Akalikai** of the epics has undertaken an unending journey through Tamil literature.

Footnotes:

1. Kailasapathy,K. (1996) **Adiyum Mudiym – Ilakkiyattil Karuttukkal**, Chennai 108, p.116
2. Prema.R. (2001) **Pen – Marapilum Ilakkiyattilum**, Chennai 17, p.45
3. Ibid, p,46
4. Subramanya Yagiar,Sa.Tu. (1999) **Tamilkkumari**, Chennai 108, (reprint) p.40

5. Ibid, p.p 44-45
6. Ibid, p.47
7. Ibid, p.51
8. Ibid, p.48
9. Ibid, p.51
10. Vali, (2001) *Avatara Purushan*, Chennai 17, p.15
11. Ibid, p.17
12. Ibid, p.17
13. Barathiyar, Mahakavi. (1968) *Pancali Sabatam – Barathiyar Kavitaikal*, Chennai, p.326
14. Ramasamy, Va.Ra. (1950) *Kotal Tivu*, Tiruchi, (reprint) Mukavurai
15. Ibid, p.112
16. Pudumaipitthan, (1967) *Kancanai*, Chennai, (reprint) Munnurai
17. Murukaratnam, T. (1976) *Pudumaipitthan Cirukataikkalai*, Madurai 1, p.22
18. Ibid, p.107