AKALIKAI IN
MODERN TAMIL LITERATURE
A Feminist View

DR. V. SABABATHY
Associate Professor
Department of Indian Studies
University of Malaya

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 Akalikai.

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 reformatory 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 same 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 retelling, 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.Yogi)
iii) Ahalya Kaviyam ( T.T. Meera)
iv) Karkani (Kambadasan)
v) Akalikai ( Elattu Mahakavi)

Akalikai in Blank Verses

i) Uyirmakai (Na.Pitchamoorth)
ii) Kalikai ( Nyani)
iii) Akalikai Innamum Kattirukkiral ( Cirpi)
iv) Raman Parvayil Akalikai (Cirpi)
v) Avatara Purusam (Vali)
vi) Vellai Yanai ( Muruga Sundaran)
vii) Oru Kalin Katalum Kaviyin Vimarcanam (Mu.Mehta)
viii) Akalikai ( M.A. Ilanchelvan - Malaysia)
ix) Akalikai - Rabindranath Tagore(Translated by Ta.Na.Kumarasamy)
Akalikai in Novel

i) Kotei Tiru (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 Chettiar)
iii) Akalikai Natakam (Pirapancan)
iv) Ahalya- Tuvijendralai (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. Yogiyar.

This is a short epic in about 106 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 Arampam (Beginning), Tirumanam (Marriage) Karpuk Kanal (the Fire of Chastity), Soochdi (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 Yogiyar 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. Yogiyar with his knowledge of Sanskrit, utilizes such uniformities for his introductory section Arampam (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 Yogiyar sings vehemently.
Did your father, the ombidment 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 unaying 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 your 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 Kanal (The Fire of Chastity) too, Yogiyar differs from the epics. Before arriving in the guise of Gautama, Indra in 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 features peregrinating, 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! Whoe'er 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. Muduvu (Conclusion), the final part contains a conversation between Rama and Gautama. Yogiya 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 Vall. 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 Yogiya 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 Kampai but found in Sanskrit works, are used by Vall.

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)

Valli's characterization of Akalikai resembles that of Yogiya. 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 Yogiyar’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 Yogiyar on Vali. The argument that the husband should have punished himself before punishing her, reminds us of Mahakavi Bharathiyar’s Pancall 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 lyengar, Va. Na 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, Vtdura, 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”.

At the end of the trial, Vidura as the Chief Juror identifies Gautama as the wrong-doer. 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 Puthumaippithtan. 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 Inhuma. 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, Puthumaippithtan 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 Puthumaippithtan’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,

Thic not of dictrocc again? Tho 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. He heart too is bewildered.(10)

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 epic writers so as to present the story in a new light.

3. Of all the characters in the Hamayana, 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 dharma, they see it as a social problem. 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 scorn 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 Putumalppithan 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 epic has undertaken an unending journey through Tamil literature.

Footnotes:

3. Ibid, p.46
5. Ibid, p.p 44-45
6. Ibid, p.47
7. Ibid, p.51
8. Ibid, p.48
9. Ibid, p.51
11. Ibid, p.17
12. Ibid, p.17
15. Ibid, p.112
18. Ibid, p.107