

Redemption of Ahalya in Pudumaippittan's "Akalikai" and "Sabavimochanam"

C. Arulmugil,

Ph. D. Research Scholar of English, Kanchi Mamunivar Centre for PG Studies, Puducherry

Pudumaippittan, a radical writer and thinker whose pen name is C. Viruthachalam, was one of the most dominant and innovative writers of the Tamil language. Community satire, progressive thinking and honest criticism are the hallmarks of his works. The Government of Tamilnadu has nationalized the works of Pudumaippittan in the year 2002. He is primarily known for his short stories and he is the first to use a vernacular of Tamil other than Chennai and Tanjore. Most of his characters spoke the Tirunelveli dialect. His writings are the mixture of idiomatic and classical words. Though Pudumaippittan's active writing was less than fifteen years in which he produced nearly 100 short stories. His writing gave him a reputation as a maverick. To portray his ideas he used various characters, both common and uncommon. Common like husbands and wives, rickshaw pullers, villagers, marginalizes peoples, saints, revolutionaries and uncommon-God, ghosts, devas and so on. The well known Tamil writer D. Jayakanthan said, "Pudumaippittan carried over the legacy of poet Subramania Bharathi and will be remembered for generations to come for the profundity of his writing".

Ahalya is a mythical personality from the Ramayana. She is also one among the Panchakanyas, the other kanyas are Tara, Sita and Mandodri from the Ramayana; Draupathi from the Mahabharatha. These five kanyas are "motherless" their birth is unnatural. These women are not engendered in the usual way; they were created from various elements of the universe thereby establishing their sanctity and chastity. Ahalya personifies water, Draupathi denotes fire, Sita stands for earth, Tara represents wind and Mandodari symbolises ether. Their very names ensure salvation and freedom from all evils. Hindus recite their names in a Sanskrit sloka to remain their spiritual strength and in truth; "Ahalyā Draupathi Sitā Tarā Mandodhari Panchākanyasarennityam mahā pāpā vimosanām". Indian women have holy shades of panchakanyas in their soul. No kanyas break down in the face of personal tragedy. Each continues to live out their life with head held high. This is one of the characteristics that set the kanyas apart from other women.

Ahalya remains unique among the five kanyas because of her daring nature and its consequence. She appeared in Balakanda one of the bisections of the Ramayana. She is the wife of Gautama Maharishi; Lord Brahma created Ahalya to break the pride of Urvashi, the foremost celestial nymph. All devas wish to marry her but Lord Brahma declared that whoever comes round the three worlds would win the hand of Ahalya. Lord Indra felt he was only worth to win the test. Immediately he goes round the world with his magical power. However Sage Narada said that Rishi Gautama won the test as he went round the cow as a part of his daily puja. On one of the days he came round a cow that gave birth to a calf. As per the Vedas, the cow at the time of bearing a calf is equal to three worlds by this Gautam came through the three worlds during his prayers. So Ahalya was married to older Gautama.

Though Ahalya was married to Gautama, Indra never got back his infatuation over Ahalya. One day Indra tricked Gautama by crowing like a rooster to make him leave the hermitage for his morning bath. When Gautama he left, he entered the hermitage in the disguise of Gautama and satisfied his lust on Ahalya. When Gautama went to riverbank he found that he came too early for morning bath; he suspected something wrong was happening for him. On his return he found Indra in his hermitage. He visualized everything that happened between Indra and Ahalya. He cursed Indra to have thousand vulvas all over his body and to lose his testicles whereas Ahalya who was innocent, had sinned with her body, was cursed to become a stone and she would return to her human form only after being graced by Rama's (one of the avatars of Lord Vishnu) foot. Rama and Lakshmana first came across the hermitage of Ahalya on their way to Mithilapuri with Sage Vishwamitra. They enquired about the hermitage to the sage who told them the pathetic story of Ahalya. Rama entered the hermitage and saw the stone. Rama touched the stone with his foot. The stone transformed into a beautiful Ahalya who had become unadulterated and understood her sins, and Rama blessed Ahalya. Though the curse varies from text to text, almost all versions describe Lord Rama as a liberation of Ahalya from her curse. This paper focuses on Pudumaippittan's two stories based on the story of Ahalya_ "Ahalikai" and "Sabavimochanam". These pair of stories is translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom. In these stories we find how the same author interpreted in two different ways the story of Ahalya. Both the stories depict the evil fate of Ahalya in diverse dimensions; mainly she does not recognize Indra. Her unbounded love for her husband is clearly visible.

The earlier story narrates how Gautama forgives Indra and Ahalya; in the later story where Ahalya was restored to life by the touch of Rama but the society never accepts her. Finally she felt Rama is not a right person to offer her the salvation and so she change herself into a stone again.

First, we analyse the short story "Ahalikai" published in 1934. This story describes the actual episode of the seduction of Ahalya by Indra but it has an odd twist of its own. Here, Ahalya and Indra are forgiven for their mistakes by Gautama. Only three characters appear in the scene: Ahalya, Gautama, Indra. Here Pudumaippittan portrays Gautama as a chief protagonist and a bubbling young husband. The desire of Indra is aroused when he notices Ahalya when she bathes in the river. Ahalya found someone is noticing her and found Indra saw her with a lustful eyes over her. She warns him by staring at him and left the place. Ahalya complained about Indra's deed to her husband. He consoled her by saying that it was impossible to be blind on those who see her. The desire of Indra never faded; he followed Ahalya that night and got rid of Gautama by crowing like a cock and seduced her when she was half asleep. She was completely taken off when she recognizes that it was Indra. She hit him, "squirming and shaking like a worm that has fallen into fire" (Pudumaippittan 2000 131-135).

When Gautama appeared, Indra stood still as the very picture of guilt He quietly gathered Ahalya with care who was terribly hurt both physically and mentally. He requested Indra to consider the woman of the universe as his sister. He turned to Ahalya and said, "Kannei! Ahalya at that moment, did your body became a feeling-less stone?" (Pudumaippittan 2000 131-135). Gautama soothe Ahalya with a wise words, "A pure mind alone is true chasity. If your body is polluted by chances, what can a helpless woman do?" (Pudumaippittan 2000 131-135). He too gives a new truth that passions changes even god into animal. The story concludes with a cryptic and ambiguous comment by Pudumaippittan, "And Ahalya? Fate's final trick which was played out in her heart, presented itself as the battleground of her husband's serenity" (Pudumaippittan 2000 131-135). The noted significance in this short story is the character of Gautama who handled the situation genuinely.

The other story for analyses is "Sabavimochanam", published after ten years of "Akalikai". Lakshmi Homström translated this story under the title "Deliverance from the Curse". The story explores alienation and loneliness within the mythic story of Ahalya and Gautama. Compared with the earlier story this one is three times longer, many characters are presented in the story like Viswamitra, Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Santhanu and the presence of Kaikeyi is just noted and the duration of time takes more years in the story. In Pudumaippittan Sirukathai Kalai, T. Murugarathinam writes, "When we compare the two stories "Akalikai" is a pond and "Sabavimochanam" is a river" (Eevargal Parvaiil Ahaligai 90). The story opens with a preface by a provocative epigraph, "For those acquainted with the Ramayana, this story might be comprehensible, unpalatable too. I am not concerned about that" (Pudumaippittan 2000 527-40). The episode opens as if all the story of Ahalya opens. Viswamitra tells the story of Ahalya in a couple of sentences to Rama and Lakshmana. The attitude of Ahalya and her fate is clearly given out by the author through Viswamitra, "That artless girl (peedai), who was deceived by Indra's magical disguise (maaya veesham). As a result of her unbounded love for her husband (alavukku adangaada paasattin vilaiyyaaga), she allowed herself to be deceived and her tainted (tan udambai maasuppaduttikondal)" (Pudumaippittan 2000 527-40). Viswamitra could almost be summarizing Pudumaippittan's earlies story "Akalikai".

Ahalya got released from the curse from the dust of Rama's feet. Gautama arrived at the scene after a century of tapasya; like a child Ahalya said she felt hungry. Gautama took some fruits from the garden and feed her hunger. Putumaippittan introduced the psychological conflict between the minds of Ahalya and Gautama where the past remained a shadow in their life. Even the other women in the hermitage talk ill of the behaviour of Ahalya in the past. This disturbs the mind of the couple. After some days they reconstruct the hermitage; to welcome Rama and his wife Sita after they come to throne. But an ill fate happened to Rama and Sita in Ayothi. Kaikeyi, (the step mother of Rama) wishes Rama to go for an exile for fourteen years and her son Bharathan to rule the country. The order of Kaiakai is obliged by Rama, and he was followed by Sita and Lakshmana, brother of Rama. This upsets Gautama and Ahalya. They recall the past how Gautama was married to much younger Ahalya as he goes round the cow bearing a calf, Indra's cheating on Ahalya and Gautama, the curses given to Indra and Ahalya and the redemption of Ahalya by the feet of Rama. They too go on exile parallel to Rama and Sita.

After fourteen years of exile Rama came to Ayothi and sat in the throne as a king. One day Rama and Sita came to the hermitage of Gautama, as they promised fourteen years back. Gautama and Ahalya welcomed the couple whole heartedly. When Sita and Ahalya was chatting Sita reveal the truth how Rama had tested her chastity by the fire ordeal. This incident takes back Ahalya and comments that one law for Ahalya, quite another for Rama? Though Ahalya commits mistake without her knowledge she slept with Indra but in the case of Sita she remained chaste during her stay in Lanka. An infuriated Ahalya refused come out when Rama and Sita leaves the hermitage. Gautama traced something wrong has happened to Ahalya. He entered the hermitage and hug Ahalya; she felt that Indra has come again in the disguise of Gautama so she freezes into the sculpted

stone again. Gautama went to Himalaya to do penance. Thus the story ends with a different angle in a post colonial concept where the author made us to re-read the story of Ahalya in a new and relevant dimension. Turning to stone once more, Pudumaippittan implies, is Ahalya's real deliverance from the curse of long ago.

Comparing the story "Akalkai" and "Sabavimochanam" we see the universal concept is highlighted by the author in a greater perspective. In the earlier story we see chastity is in mind not in the body. In the case of the other story we see redemption is for the curse and not for the sin. In the first story Gautama plays a major role whereas in the other Rama play the vital role. The two stories show the artistic talent in the writings of Pudumaippittan. The first is a normal one with merciful context the other is a different idea with an idealistic view of life. Altogether the two stories emphasises on the redemption of Ahalya. Calm consideration of such situations would show that they are just portrayals of similar difficulties in our day-to-day life. It is for us to benefit from the moral trials contained in them. The lesson of the Ahalya episode is that, however deadly one's sin, one may hope to be freed from its consequence by penitence and punishment. Instead of condemning others for their sins, we should look within our own hearts and try to purify them of every evil thought. The best of us have need for eternal vigilance, if we would escape sin. This is the moral of Ahalya's error.

Works Cited

- [1] Rathanam, K. *Evargal Parvayil Ahalkai*. Chennai: Ithinai Pathipagam, 2003. Print.
- [2] Paulala Richman, ed. *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008.
- [3] www.readingroom.com.
- [4] <http://kiskikahani.openspaceindia.org/articles/ahalya-theme-and-variations/>.