

AN EXPOSURE OF THE PROBLEMS OF SPINSTERS AS DEPICTED IN THE MALAYSIAN TAMIL MODERN POEMS BY USING EVENTS FROM THE RAMAYANA EPIC

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Purpose of the study---The major objective of the research is to analyse how the events from the epic poem Ramayana are used in three Malaysian Tamil modern poems to portray the dilemma of the present-day spinsters.

Methodology: The design of this study is qualitative method and the method of descriptive analysis has also been used.

Main Findings: The findings show that the selected three Malaysian Tamil modern poems have been written to illustrate the problems faced by spinsters by using two events from the Ramayana. Of the three poems, one poem uses the event featuring Akalikai waiting for Rama's arrival to release her from her cursed life and two other poems showcase Sita waiting for the coming of Rama to break the bow and marry her.

Applications of this study: This study is useful in finding out the effectiveness of using situations from epics to the poems of modern days in drawing examples, guidances and reflections so as to understand and find solutions to the problems of spinsters in the Malaysian Indian society of today.

Novelty/Originality of this study: Problems of spinsters as depicted in Tamil modern poems reflect the reality faced by these people in the real-life of today. The poems do not claim to have a continuity of these problems from the past. The research claims to be the first such attempt to do a comparative study with an ancient literature, the Ramayana epic, in finding the similarities and differences of these problems in various distant time frames.

Keywords---Epic, Ramayana, modern poem, spinsters, Malaysia, Tamil.

I. INTRODUCTION

The entire literary works of classical and medieval Tamil literature are written in poetic form and the poems are formulated according to poetic rules of *Yappu* that consists of components such as *Eluttu*², *Acai*³, *Cir*⁴, *Talai*⁵, *Ati*⁶

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² *Eluttu* describes the letters in Tamil.

and *Total*⁷. Prose-shaped works and poetry in Tamil literature began to flourish in the early 20th century due to Western influence. This era of change in Tamil literature is known as the modern Tamil literary era. In addition to the changes in Tamil literature in India, there were also Tamil literature diaspora in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore and Europe. Although Malaysian Tamil literature had begun as early as 1887, Tamil modern poetry began to grow only from 1964. These poems were composed without complying to the *Yappu* rule, the law governing Tamil traditional poetry (Paramasivam, S. 2000).

Poems are composed using various techniques. The use of *Ramayana* as an influence in poetry is one of the techniques of creating literary works aimed at conveying ideas or messages to the readers. The epitome of events from *Ramayana* are best portrayed in rhyme to convey the ideas to the readers through the beauty of the words. The epic poem is full of events and characters that can be attributed to events and characters of today. The use of the epic influences from *Ramayana* in Malaysian Tamil traditional poetry and Malaysian Tamil modern poems reinforces the messages to be delivered (Sababathy, V. 2002).

Ramayana has influenced the culture and philosophy of the Indian community. In fact, the messages and ideas presented by events and characters from the epic poem are easily understood and readily accepted by the readers of today. Therefore, many poets use examples from *Ramayana* in their poems to convey messages and ideas to their readers' (Abdul Rahman, 1990).

II. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Since literature reflects the lives of people, then the sensitive events that happen in a particular society will indirectly touch the feelings of the writers or poets of that society. This feeling will give them the courage and liberty to express themselves in their creative work. In this case, the poets related the events from the *Ramayana* to the present-day events in the Indian community.

The problem faced by spinsters today is the difficulty in finding a suitable husband in order to experience a family life. This dilemma has touched the feelings of many writers and poets. The selected poems were written to express such feelings in which the poets cited the characters of Akalikai and Sita from the *Ramayana*. Both these characters were waiting for Rama's presence and blessing to end their loneliness which is similar in nature to today's spinsters. Hence, poets used the events from the *Ramayana* to reinforce the message they intended to deliver. The waiting of the two women for Rama is related to the waiting of today's spinsters for their ideal man.

The statistics from the Department of Statistics, Malaysia in 2017 showed that 20% of women over 15 years of age were unmarried in Malaysia (Women, Family and Social Welfare 2018). The problem of getting a suitable

³ *Acai* describes the syllable formed by combining the letters.

⁴ *Cīr* is a word that is formed by using *Acai*.

⁵ *Talai* is the customary law of *Cīr* in a traditional poem line.

⁶ *Ati* describes the number of rows in a traditional poem function.

⁷ *Total* describes the law of the use of aspects of alliteration and assonances in a traditional poem.

match for a spinster today is a challenge because many of them are highly educated than men. Such unmarried girls are found in all walks of life. The selected poets expressed this concern through their poems by using events from the epic poem *Ramayana*. Thus, this researcher intends to study how these poets had used the events from the epic poem *Ramayana* to relate to the problems faced by the spinsters of today.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The major objective of the research is to analyse how the events from the epic poem *Ramayana* were used in three Malaysian Tamil modern poems to portray the dilemma of the spinsters of today.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher found that several studies related to events involving the epic poem *Ramayana* were carried out by other researchers. Samikkanu Jabamoney Ishak Samuel (2008), conducted a Ph.D study entitled "The Influence of Epics from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in Malaysian Tamil Modern Poems". The findings showed that a total of 15 events from *Ramayana* were used in 43 Malaysian Tamil modern poems. This study also showed that more Tamil modern poetry were produced by using the *Ramayana* influence compared to Tamil traditional poetry.

Meanwhile, Kavri Krishnasamy (2015), had conducted a Master of Arts degree study entitled 'The *Ramayana* Socio-Cultural Value in Tamil short stories in Malaysia'. The researcher had selected 53 short stories from the newspaper 'Tamil Nesan' published in 2012 to conduct this study. She studied the Malaysian Tamil short stories based on the socio-cultural values of the Ayodhya Kanda found in *Ramayana*. The findings showed that socio-cultural values related to family, administration, friendship, entertaining guests and community services as well as the value of simplicity shown in the *Ramayana* were still featured in Malaysian Tamil short stories.

Veeramohan Veeraputharan (2007), conducted a Master of Arts study entitled 'The usage of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in the rendering of some Malaysian Tamil short stories. This researcher had chosen short stories published from 1957 to 1987 as his study material. The findings showed that events and characters in the *Ramayana* had been featured in the modern genre' such as short stories.

Several articles relating to how the *Ramayana* epic influenced the various Malaysian Tamil literary genre' were also published in certain journals. Samikkanu Jabamoney Ishak Samuel (2015), had produced an article entitled '*Ramayana* Myths in Malaysian Tamil Modern Poem' published in the Journal of *Tamil Peraivu* published by the University of Malaya. In this article, the researcher had shown the influence of various aspects of *Ramayana* in Malaysian Tamil modern poems.

Meanwhile, Samikkanu Jabamoney Ishak Samuel (2015), had also produced another article entitled 'Akalikai - A Mythical View in Malaysian Tamil Modern Poem'. This article was published in *Aivu Kovai, Volume 4*, published

by the University of Kamaraj, Madurai, India. In this article, the researcher discussed the use of the character 'Akalikai' in Malaysian Tamil modern poems.

In addition to the above publications, Samikkanu Jabamoney Ishak Samuel (2015) had also produced another article entitled '*Ramayana - Rama Broke the Bow: A Mythical View in Malaysian Tamil Modern Poems*' presented in Theories in Tamil Literature Conference organized by the University of Kamaraj, Madurai, India. In this article, the researcher had explained the symbolism behind the use of the event where Rama broke the bow, in Malaysian Tamil modern poems.

Furthermore, Sababathy, V. (1999) had also presented a paper entitled 'The Influence of Ramayana and Mahabharata in Tamil Modern Poems' at the Ramayana International Seminar Conference and the First Mahabharata Seminar Conference held from 21 to 24 October 1999 at University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. This article had successfully revealed the influence of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* found in Tamil modern poetry. This paper was also included in his book entitled *Tamil Kavitai Valam* (Sababathy, V. 2002).

After examining the above studies, it was found that no study was yet done using the events from the *Ramayana* to compare the dilemma faced by spinsters in Malaysia.

IV. METHOD OF STUDY

The design of this study is qualitative method and the research method used is descriptive analysis. The researcher has studied the Malaysian Tamil modern poems which relate to the problem of spinsters by comparing it to the events of the epic poem *Ramayana* to collect data. However, the researcher has chosen only two specific events from *Ramayana*, viz:- an event that features Akalikai waiting for Rama's presence to free her from her cursed life and the events describing Sita waiting for Rama's presence to break the bow in order to marry her.

MIMETIC THEORY

The researcher has used mimetic theory in this study. Objective, expressive, pragmatic, and mimetic approaches are the four aspects used in studying a literary work. These four types of approaches are outlined by Abrams, M.H (1976), in his book *The Mirror and the Lamp*. The objective approach is an approach that emphasizes the literary work itself. The expressive approach is the author's approach. A pragmatic approach is an approach that gives emphasis to the reader. The mimetic approach is an approach that emphasizes reality (Abrams, M.H. 1976).

The mimetic or mimesis approach explains the relationship between the work and the reality. The mimetic term comes from Greek. In English, the word mimesis is translated as imitation or representation (Teeuw, A. 1995). The mimesis approach was also discussed by Plato in his book *Republic*. This approach discusses the referential aspect, the reference of the literary masterpiece and the real world (Teeuw, A. 1988).

In this context, mimetic approach considers art work as a reflection, mimicry or realization of reality. Modern literary works, rhyme and quotes are the elements from epic works like the *Ramayana* to display the reality of life. For example, if we look at a landscape, we can compare it to the landscape on a postcard. Actually, postcards are not a gauge for any real value, but the postcard is the benchmark to enjoy reality before our eyes. Hence, in a literary text, the comparison between a person or a natural phenomenon with a painting or illustration is a common factor of comparison. Thus, the norm of beauty revealed in a work of art is recognized by certain communities and is used as a benchmark of a reality (Teeuw, A. 1995).

Through a mimetic approach, the elements of myths and epics are used as a hint to display an issue or present a current message. M. Metta, a renowned poet in Tamil Nadu, India states that the myth and epic elements are used to deliver the latest message.

Message delivered
Based on myths
Not a mythical 'genre'
But new creations
(Metta, M. 1980).

The quote of M. Metta clearly demonstrates that the use of the myth and epic elements in modern literary work is to convey a message pertaining to selected statements to the readers.

Therefore, when the influence of a myth or epic is used to present the current issue or problem, the message can be used as a lesson for all time references (Abdul Rahman, 1990). For example, there is a message that calls parents to find a suitable mate for girls at a young age by quoting the events from *Ramayana*, the Janakan event. Sita's father, Janakan, held a contest to choose a brave and intelligent husband for his daughter. In that contest Rama had successfully defeated all other contenders by breaking the bow provided by Janakan. So, such an event can be used as a guide to parents of today that it is their responsibility to find a suitable mate for their daughters through proper selection at the right time to prevent the problem of their daughters remaining spinsters. Hence, literary works produced based on mythical or epic elements are really eye-openers.

In the meantime, the literary master, Mark Scorer, states that the use of myth or epic influence in any literary work can display a reality in the work (Maraimalai, S.I. 1979). Therefore, an author can display the message he or she wants to highlight to the readers, more clearly and accurately by using an influential epic or mythical event or character. For example, the author can illustrate the reality of the problem of spinsters by using events from the epic poem *Ramayana*, concerning the character Akalikai who awaits Rama's presence to free her of the curse of non-existence.

Additionally, the use of myth and epic influences as one of the techniques for producing literary works, especially in the genre of poetry has been discussed by Tolkappiyar, a well-known poet, in his work, *Tolkappiyam*. *Tolkappiyam* is one of the oldest literary masterpiece produced in Tamil. According to Tolkappiyar, the aspect of *Tonmai* explains that a literary masterpiece, especially the genre of poetry can be composed based on the influence of myths or epics such as the epic *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Silappatikāram* and others. A work will be more valuable in rhetoric if the work is created based on epic influences, especially epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (Ilampuranar, 2003).

The Tolkappiyar view was reinforced by C.G. Jung. He states that if an epic influence is used with appropriate and effective techniques in a literary work, the work will attract readers even if the poetic aspect is not well used in the work (Chandraboss, 1997). This suggests that the influence of myths or epics can play an important role in the production of a literary work.

V. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings show that the selected three Malaysian Tamil modern poems describe the problems faced by spinsters by using two events from the *Ramayana*. Of the three poems, one poem uses the event featuring Akalikai waiting for Rama's presence to release her from her cursed life and two other poems showcase Sita waiting for the presence of Rama to break the bow and marry her.

The events involving Akalikai and Sita who were both waiting for Rama's presence to free them from their predicament were most appropriate to illustrate the problem of spinsters of today as they too await their Rama to free them from the loneliness of spinsterhood and the bad-mouthing of the society of their situation.

The poet, Shanmugapriya, in her modern poem '*Neruppu Malarkal*' meaning 'Flowers of flame' features the issue of spinsters waiting for the presence of a spouse by comparing the events that show Akalikai waiting for Rama's presence to free her from her cursed life.

Not sold
In the wedding market
Not our fault
.....
Until the presence of
A Rama
We will wait as flaming blooms
In the grave
(*Malaysia Tamil Ilakkiyam*, 1995).

This modern poem clearly illustrates the hardship of spinsters waiting for the presence of a spouse by comparing the events that show Akalikai waiting for Rama's presence. According to the story in the epic poem *Ramayana*, the God Indiran disguised himself as Maharishi Kautamar, Akalikai's husband and had sex with her. Although Akalikai was aware that the person who was with her was not her husband, she did not object to the intentions of Indiran. Coming to know of the incident, Kautamar's wrath was triggered and he cursed Akalikai to become a person who does not eat, drink and move and also not be seen by anyone - alive but non-existent. But he told Akalikai that she would be free from the curse only when she touches Rama's feet. Therefore, Akalikai waits for Rama's presence to release her from that curse (Raja Gopalachari, 1973). On the way to a town called Mithila, the place of the contest for Sita, Maharishi Vicuvamittirar told the unfortunate Akalikai story to Rama. Rama went straight into the cottage and freed Akalikai from the curse of her husband, Kautamar (Hari Prasad Shastri, 1959). She was now free to live her life again, thanks to Rama.

The spinsters today, as Akalikai, wait for the presence of someone to free them from the heinous look of the society at their situation. In this modern era, being educated becomes a deterring factor as many are more educated than the men or they themselves start choosing the kind of men whom they think are more suitable for them. This attitude of choosing a life partner causes girls to get married when they are much older. Generally, girls demanding to live in ivory towers will complete their studies around the age of 25 and start looking for jobs first before a husband. When the age for marriage increases, chances of getting a younger partner becomes slim because however old the men are they prefer to marry girls much younger to them. This causes those who missed the boat not to get the partners they want. These girls will continue to wait for a life partner like Akalikai who waited for Rama's presence to release her from her cursed life. These spinsters will experience the same sense of waiting.

The use of events describing Akalikai's character awaiting the presence of Rama is very effective in displaying the problem of spinsters as the problem continues to grow every year in Malaysia, especially among urban residents. For example, the statistics of the Department of Statistics, Malaysia in 2018 showed that 2,397,271 girls aged 15 and above were still unmarried. This number is 20% of the total female population in Malaysia (Women, Family and Social Welfare Statistics 2018). The number of unmarried girls is from all walks of life. Thus, the poet tried to describe the problem of the spinsters through the look and reflection of the society in her poem '*Neruppu Malarkal*'. Therefore, in order to overcome this problem, parents must play an important role in getting the right suitors when their daughters are still young and eligible.

After releasing Akalikai from the curse, Rama and his brother, Ilakkuvan and Maharishi Vicuvamittirar went straight to Mithila. In Mithila, King Janakan was holding a contest to choose a husband for his daughter, Sita. In the contest, all the princes who wanted to marry Sita had to show their strength by lifting a heavy bow, bending it and stringing it and shooting arrows with it. When Rama lifts the bow and tries to bend the bow to attach a bow string, the bow breaks into two (Hari Prasad Shastri, 1959).

In relation to the above event, two poems have been produced by quoting the event and describing how Sita was waiting for Rama's presence to break the bow in order to win her hand in marriage. One such poem entitled '*Oru Vinnappattin Paricīlanai*' which means 'Processed Appeal' was written by S. Arunasalam. This poem illustrates the hope of a spinster for a man to come and accept her as his wife, just as Sita who waited for Rama to come.

Hey!
You heirs of Rama
To give
Meaning to my name
Can you make me a Sita?
(Arunasalam, C. 1993).

In the above poem, the poet presented the appeal of a spinster to the man to receive her as his wife by implicitly linking the Rama incident when he came to break the bow to marry Sita. According to the *Ramayana*, King Janakan, Sita's father, wanted the best for his daughter and so had a '*swyambara*', a contest, where all interested princes and kings were invited. All they had to do was lift the heavy bow, bend it and string it. The one who could do it won the princess Sita as his wife. Many came to try but no one managed to lift the bow. Sita continues to wait for the appearance of the right person. Finally, Rama comes and as he bends the bow to string it, it breaks into two. Sita finally meets her man (Raja Gopalachari, 1973).

While the freedom to go out of the house has opened up more opportunities for girls to interact or associate with boys, but many highly educated girls want to choose a husband who is on par with them. In addition, good looks also play an important role in the selection of a life partner. The beautiful girls do not face many problems, but the plain ones have trouble getting a good looking man. Usually they end up with the other plain or not good looking man who will marry them (*Al-Islam*, 2003). Hence, career and beauty factors play an important role in finding the right prince charming. These two factors are the main prerequisites for marriages today, just like the conditions laid down by King Janakan to the suitors who wanted to marry Sita.

Contrary to S. Arunasalam, the poet Muhammad Sahib in his poem '*Vilāipōkā Kanni*' meaning 'The Unsaleable virgins' showed the willingness of spinsters to accept the unsuitable suitors, like Ravana, if there is no chance to find a noble husband like Rama.

Even the trees on the street
Maybe
Touched by someone.

But.....

We
In a family prison
Daily count
The Iron grills of grief.

Cry

Our silent tears
Find solace
Only on our pillows.

For the darkened hearts
To be illuminated
We don't need a Rama

To break the unsaleable cuff
Ravana's flash of lightning
Is enough.

(Ciraku Virikkum Cinna Kuyilkal, 1989)

In the above modern poem, the poet states that even the trees along the streets might be touched by people. Sadly, the unmarried girl is lost and trapped in her parents' house. As the girls' marriageable age reduces, they are no longer willing to wait as Sita was waiting for Rama's presence to break the bow and accept her as his wife. On the contrary, in order to illuminate the darkness of unmarried life, they are willing to accept a husband even like the Demon Ravana to brighten their lives.

Life without a spouse is imperfect. Human beings have lived in pairs since the early existence of humans. When God created the universe, he had given Eve a life partner who was Adam because human beings cannot live alone (*The Holy Bible, 1978*). However, many unfortunate girls do not get married because of the passing of the supposedly marriageable age. Hence, these older spinsters, no longer have the opportunity to choose a life partner to their liking, but to accept anyone who can give them a companionship.

Meanwhile, the Statistics Department of Malaysia in 2018 showed that 3,107,200 males and 2,397,271 girls aged 15 and above were unmarried (Women, Family and Social Welfare 2018). This figure shows that the number of unmarried men is higher than women. The ratio of 130 men for every 100 girls clearly shows that every girl can get married if the man accepts her as a life partner. Thus, the poets in both their modern poems of '*Oru Vinnappattin Paricilanai*' and '*Vilapōkā Kanni*' call upon men to marry the spinsters waiting for them.

In addition, through both their modern poems '*Oru Vinnappattin Paricīlanai*' and '*Vilāipōkā Kanni*' the poets carry the message that girls should be married at the right age, when they are young and eligible. If the age of marriage passes, then they will have trouble getting the right partner. In addition to that, women marrying late in life will have problems with pregnancy and childbearing because the best child-bearing age is between 20 and 35 years (*Al-Islam*, 2003).

Furthermore, the poets in both '*Oru Vinnappattin Paricīlanai*' and '*Vilāipōkā Kanni*', indirectly compare the girls waiting for their suitor to Sita waiting for Rama to come and accept her as his wife. Although in both poems the poets do not express in detail the event of Rama's breaking the bow, both poems mentions that Sita is waiting for Rama's presence to break the bow as that is the condition that will allow her to marry. In the modern poem '*Oru Vinnappattin Paricīlanai*', the old man's appeal to those whom he sees as Rama's heirs to accept and marry the girls and not make it difficult as it was for Sita who had to wait for Rama to break the bow to make her his wife. In the modern poem '*Vilāipōkā Kanni*', the statement "Rama is no longer expected to illuminate the darkness" is also implicitly referring to spinsters who are no longer expecting a noble husband like Rama to come, but whoever (even a Ravana) is willing to accept them.

The Malaysian Tamil modern poet has used the character, Akalikai, waiting for Rama's presence to free her from her cursed life and Sita waiting for Rama's presence to break the bow illustrates the dilemma of spinsters growing old without getting married. The poets have successfully used both the events effectively to compare the dilemma and expectation of unmarried women with the two women characters in the epic poem *Ramayana*.

The use of mythical events such as that of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and others in literary works are also supported by several literary scholars. For example, the poet Yeats argues that the epic story is not only influential among educated societies, but also among uneducated communities (Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, 1972). Yeats insists that the use of epic influences in poems is very effective in delivering messages to uneducated masses. Therefore, events that describe Akalikai and Sita waiting for Rama's presence are not only very popular among the educated Indians but also the uneducated. With this, the use of events from the *Ramayana* to convey a particular message is very effective in raising the spirit among the readers, especially as in this case among spinsters who feel frustrated and ignored.

Moreover, based on psychological shortcomings, C.G. Jung and Sigmund Freud state that the cultural elements or experiences of the forgotten society remain in the subconscious mind (Jung, C.G, 1980). Hence, events describing Akalikai and Sita waiting for Rama's presence remain in the unconscious instinct of almost every Tamil who knows the epic poems. At some point, these unconscious elements are borne in the writings to illustrate current issues such as the problems of the spinsters, which had touched the feelings of the poets (Eleazar M. Meletinsky, 1998).

Meanwhile, literary master Friedrich Paul states that poems written based on mythical or epic symbols will touch the audience more effectively. A message or idea can be conveyed to the readers more effectively through the use of mythical or epic symbols (Friedrich Paul, 1979). The use of events that illustrated Akalikai becoming a stone is a symbol that seeks to inform that one must abstain from infidelity thus, is very effective in promoting the importance of being loyal towards one's husband.

Master Mark, a literary master, also states that the use of myths or epic influences will reveal the reality in a literary work (Maraimalai, S.I. 1979). In tandem with Mark Scorer's views, Malaysian Tamil poets managed to use the events featuring Akalikai and Sita who were waiting for the presence of Rama to portray the dilemma and real situation of the spinsters waiting for the presence of the men who could save them from spinsterhood.

VI. CONCLUSION

The problem of spinsters has been clearly and effectively manifested through events describing Akalikai waiting for Rama's presence to free her from her cursed life and Sita's waiting for Rama's presence to break the bow to marry her. As depicted in the selected modern poems, the two events are well used to explain the predicament of the spinsters in the Indian community in Malaysia. As age catches up, many are waiting, some very highly educated, waiting for their Rama to free them from spinsterhood. Today, it doesn't matter even if it is a Ravana and not a Rama who proposes; these lonely women do accept any willing suitor to move on hoping for a happy and fulfilling life.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

There are many literary works that use events and characters from the epic poem *Ramayana* when producing a literary masterpiece. In this regard, the researcher has selected Malaysian Tamil modern poems as a study corpus and two events from the *Ramayana* to be used as examples, one showing Akalikai awaiting Rama's presence to free her from her curse and the second relating how Sita is awaiting the presence of Rama to break the bow so that she could marry him. The researcher hopes to study how well the poets were able to illustrate the similar problem faced by many spinsters in Malaysia who are waiting for their saviours, the ones who will release them from their spinsterhood, through the chosen events from *Ramayana*. Thus, an effective portrayal of the new uses the old, which is discussing the issue of spinsters of today through the effective use of events from *Ramayana*.

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