

Revisiting Ahalya: Sujoy Ghosh's Cinematic Depiction of Mythical Odyssey and its Confrontation with Patriarchy

Dr.ECCLESTON, PhD
Scholar Department of
English, Faculty of Arts
Banaras Hindu University
Varanasi, 221005

Dr.THOMAS
FELDMAN
Assistant Professor
Department of English,
Faculty of Arts
Banaras Hindu University
Varanasi, 221005

Abstract:

The *Ramayana* has always been more vocal about the various attributes of male characters than about females. Women, however, have been roughly divided into two sections- the good and the bad. Good women are characterised by their virtue, devotion, and purity while bad women are characterised by their undisguised sexuality, curiosity, and promiscuity. Their actions in turn lead them to be labelled as adulterer(s) or rakshasi(s). Considered the world's best creation by Brahma, Ahalya, in *The Ramayana* has been the centre of several re-interpretations because of her complex and controversial character. What is debatable is to ascertain if she is a victim of her own vulnerabilities or a prey to the unjust deeds of Lord Indra. However, the commonality in all the versions is the punishment for her infidelity. Sujoy Ghosh's fourteen-minute short film *Ahalya* in 2015, garnered positive acclaim for its storyline and representation of the characters- Ahalya, Rishi Gautam, and Lord Indra, in the backdrop of modern-day Kolkata. What is different in Ghosh's film is that he has given a feminist standpoint to this mythological tale in his *Ahalya*. The paper endeavours to investigate how Ghosh debunks the chauvinistic details and the theme of sexuality that surrounds the Ahalya story. It will also focus on how Ghosh overturns the 'sin' myth of Ahalya in the 21st century and gives a feminist viewpoint to the story. It is also an attempt to understand if it is only a woman who is to be punished for transgression and to shed light on the play of good and bad metaphors in the film, which Sujoy Ghosh excellently documents on cinematic canvas.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Transgression, Sin, Punishment, Sexuality, Body

There exists a discursive correlation between life and literature. Conventional life serves as a source of inspiration for literature, while literature assumes the crucial role of shaping life. Literature is expressed in various genres, each of which mirrors the significance, purpose, and societal position of the genre within its social framework. The epic *Ramayana* has also undergone several variations across centuries. As Romila Thapar points out about the diversity of Ramayanas:

The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations which changed the conceptualization of character, event and meaning. (4)

The retelling of the life stories of the female figures in the epic in the form of fiction, dramas, and films, asserts the potency and curiosity the epics generate in the common people. All the retellings retain the basic storylines, only the motifs of the life stories of famous characters vary and are re-produced. They play a pivotal role in the demythification of female figures through reinterpretation from the viewpoint of authors and directors. This also reinforces and records the shifting political and social contexture in which the authors and directors bestow *de novo* towards the literature of their time.

Ahalya, considered the most exquisite woman created by God Brahma was married to Rishi Gautam, who was much older than her in age. The story of the incident for which Ahalya is known is her 'supposed' infidelity to her husband. Picked and retold most is Ahalya's knowledge of Indra being the impostor, her sexual relation with Indra and infidelity towards Gautam, and finally her redemption by Ram. Also, an important part of the story is her defiance or regret of the act. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Ahalya knew that it was Lord Indra in disguise as her husband who had come to make love to her. She was sexually curious about the King of Gods and so had indulged in adultery consensually. Gautam who was entering the hut after his bath and performing austerities caught Indra red-handed at the very moment when he was leaving the hut hurriedly. He knew what had transpired and cursed both Indra and his wife Ahalya for the sin committed. He cursed Indra that he would lose his testicles and his wife by saying:

You will stay here for many thousands of years without food or drink/, living on air alone, and remain lying on ashes full of remorse / You will dwell in this hermitage unperceived by anyone of all created beings // When, however, Sri Rama, son of Dasharatha /, who is hard to overcome for anyone, visits this fearful grove, then alone you will be absolved of your sin // Completely rid of cupidity and infatuation by virtue of hospitality that you will extend to him /, O immoral woman, you will regain your own pristine body and return to my presence full of joy // (*Srimad Valmiki Ramayana*, Canto 48, Line 29-32)

Indra, aided by the assistance of other deities, was rescued by acquiring the testicles of a ram. Conversely, Ahalya was condemned to endure invisibility until Ram arrived to free her from the clutches of avarice and delusion. In some versions, Ahalya is unaware of Indra's trickery. After realising what had happened, she begs forgiveness from her husband. Her husband may or may not believing her still curses her to be a stone and wait for Ram to liberate her so as to reunite with him again.

All the stories woven around the same motifs both conform to and question the patriarchal norms for women and their sexuality. Where Ahalya's curse is seen as a necessity, as a punishment for trying to explore her body and sexuality (considered as sin), a way of redemption from worldly desires, Indra being a male and King of Gods, his curse is a misfortune. A woman's body has always been seen as a site of showcasing power. Sovereign power was "essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it (Foucault 136). Where a woman continues to suffer for ages for her transgression, Indra who was also an equal partner in the act still retains his political supremacy since Indra, the King of Gods often resorted to chicanery.

Wendy Doniger in her article mentions that "Ahalya is, like Helen, the paradigmatic beauty and paradigmatic whore in Hindu civilization" (47). The meaning of 'Ahalya' is 'flawless', "one who cannot be ploughed" (Bhattacharya 2). In other words, she is a virgin, a *kanya*. She is a *kanya* or one among the five virgins because she alone dared to transgress, satisfy her curiosity, and accept gracefully the consequence of her deed. She is also seen as someone who is untamed as her marriage could not suppress her sexual desire. Pratibha Ray in her Preface of *Mahamoha* says:

One should analyze both the psychological and sociological aspects of committing a sin. Many complicated, psychological, sociological and economic reasons are behind it. Years of suffering, deprivation, emotional trauma and conflicts drive a person towards sin . . . If she has a chance to tell her own story, what will she talk about? Will she talk about her happiness and sorrow, vice and virtue or suffrage and liberation? (vi-vii)

Sujoy Ghosh, who is best known for his 2012 film *Kahaani*, once again brings out a short gripping tale on his cinematic canvas. He takes a modern take on one of the most told and retold segments of *The Ramayana*- the Ahalya episode. Produced by Royal Stag Barrel Select Large Short Films, the fourteen-minute short film stars the legendary actor Soumitra Chatterjee as Rishi Gautam alias Goutam Sadhu, an artist, Radhika Apte as the enigmatic Ahalya and Tota Roy Chowdhury as Lord Indra alias Indra Sen, an Inspector. The film set in upper middle-class society in Kolkata begins with Inspector Indra Sen at Goutam Sadhu's doorstep ringing the calling bell. He has come for investigating a case of a missing person, named Arjun. The door is opened by Ahalya and we immediately see Indra Sen taken aback by her beauty. His entrancement is beautifully expressed through his eyes and lingering gaze on her form with an enchanting Rabindra Sangeet playing at the backdrop, "*Esho amarghorebahirhoyeesotumi je achoantore*" (*Ahalya* 0:55-1:12). This song in a way sets up the stage for Indra to step into the unsuspecting world of deceit and trickery. Entering the living room Indra sees some dolls or figurines kept on a table, one of which falls making a noise. There is a look of unpreparedness in Ahalya's eyes. She tells him awkwardly that this is a weird mystery since the dolls fall whenever a new person comes to the house. While leaving the room to call Sadhu she picks up the doll and scolds it saying, "All of you are becoming very naughty!" (01:39-41) This line of hers strikes a little strange. Indra recognises one of the figurines as Arjun whom he has come to search for. He also sees a 'stone' kept in a case. Goutam Sadhu enters the scene and through conversation, Sen comes to know that whom he had mistaken as Sadhu's daughter, is indeed his wife. He is very surprised at this revelation and this can be seen through his expressions. Indra Sen is deeply infatuated by Ahalya and Ahalya too responds to it devoid of any shyness. She even acknowledges his attraction towards her with subtle glances and touch. Her white summer dress is a symbol both of purity as well as unbridled sexuality. Judith Butler argues that in patriarchy-dominated societies, "matter of bodies are seen as a kind of materialization governed by regulatory norms in order to ascertain the workings of heterosexual hegemony in the

formation of what qualifies a viable body” (xxiv). On the other hand, Ahalya here is represented as an extremely aware subject who is conscious as well as confident about her sexuality. She manipulates her body in a way to control Indra’s gaze over her, in a way controlling the male gaze. Her body, glances, and actions speak the language of seduction. In the epics where Indra is the controller, the one with the agency, a reversal of role takes place in the film with Ahalya in control of the reins. The lust is stoked with actions and not in the open. When Indra enquires about Arjun, Goutam says that he had come to him for a sitting and the last figurine made by him was inspired by Arjun. He reveals that while with Arjun, he had shown him the magic ‘stone’ kept in the case which helps in changing identities. Arjun was in some problem and wanting an escape had asked for the stone. Ironically, there is a moment in the film where speaking in the context of *Ramayana*, Goutam asks Indra if he has ever read the *Ramayana*. Indra replies:

Indra Sen: Long back...I know the basic storyline.

Goutam Sadhu (laughs): Basic storyline. Love that! (*Ahalya*07:15–19)

This specific moment stands out due to its relevance to the millennial generation. The majority of individuals are familiar with the overall narrative, although not every intricate detail or variant of the story. Indra's assertion that he comprehends "the basic storyline" can be seen as quite reductionist in a sense. Then Sadhu goes on to narrate that Lord Indra, The King of Gods, and pointing out at Sen says “your namesake” too had a similar stone with the help of which he carried on with his mischievous activities. Sen refusing to believe his gibberish talks gets ready to arrest Sadhu. At the same time, Ahalya calls Sadhu to come up with her mobile which she had left there. Sadhu urges Indra to try out the magicality of the stone so that he can believe him.

Unable to keep his curiosity in check and egged on by Sadhu, Indra takes the stone and goes upto Ahalya’s room. When he sees Sadhu’s reflection instead of his own in the mirror,he is shocked. Ahalya tells Indra whom she assumes is her husband to send off Indra and come back to her as soon as possible. Indra confused, shocked, and scared turns to leave fearing repercussions but returns unable to avoid his lust and embraces Ahalya romantically. The scene next changes to darkness. Indra when he wakes up, he finds himself in a dark place unable to move an inch, unable to breathe properly. He cries and shouts for help but his cries go unheard. He hears voices outside and struggling he falls. At the same time, Sadhu points out at the dolls and says to the newcomer:

Goutam Sadhu: My latest creation! (and pointing at Ahalya) All because of her (13:03-07).

Ahalya comes and picks up the fallen doll looking like Indra Sen and chastises it repeating her earlier words

Ahalya: Now don't you start becoming naughty like the others! (13:15)

A warning in a sense to the unsuspected newcomer-prey as well. It is then that Indra Sen eventually realises the predicament he is in. To his horror, he finally discerns that he has been castrated- here turned into a 'figurine wooden doll' looking exactly the same as his real self, just like the other dolls he had seen on the table.

Grim and brave, both are symbols that are associated with Ahalya. She has always been the subject to impart lessons on idealism, morality, fidelity, infidelity, and punishment. Since ages, it is her sexuality seen as a sin that is realised and punished. Her curse can also be seen as a process of disciplining her for her supposed sin. She is used as an example of infidelity and as a warning to women about the punishment in store if they stray away from the institution of marriage. The logic behind the curse "that turned Ahalya to stone may also be at work in the practice of depicting voluptuous women in the stone sculptures on Hindu temples: it is the best way to capture and control them" (Doniger 39). However, many like to ignore the fact that "Ahalya's complicity" may have been a result of "Gautam's inadequacies" (Doniger 43). Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* asserts that men unrestrictedly oppress women to maintain family and patrimony. A woman's dignity is acknowledged only when she accepts her patriarchal role of "bed service" and housework. She also puts forth that the various inequalities in roles and responsibilities of a husband and wife come to the fore when they pass time in conjugal. She states that marriage frustrates "woman's erotic satisfaction, denies them the freedom and individuality of their feelings, drives them to adultery by way of necessary and ironic dialectic" (672). It is the disregard of the husbands which act as a driving force behind women engaging in adultery to seek out their own sensual pleasure. In her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Helene Cixous refers to *écriture féminine* and argues that women must break free from the constraints of male-centered gender norms in order to find their own voice. To achieve this, women must challenge the idealistic notions imposed by patriarchal society and reclaim their bodies which have been objectified and viewed through a male lens. Manorama Mahapatra in her poem "Ahalya: The Self-fulfilled" acquits Ahalya of any wrongdoing. Her Ahalya is a woman with her own mind and choices:

She is what she is! Herself

Her Time present
Her Time future
She manifests now
To fulfill herself
She needs the touch
Of no holy feet
Any longer! (35)

Ahalya's emancipation at the end focuses on her emancipation through a man, further highlighting the fact that she can only attain it when the man desires. Mahapatra endeavors to liberate Ahalya from her oppressive surroundings, without delving into the matter of her actions and their moral implications. The reformed 'new' Ahalya will discover her autonomy and assert her identity in the present or future, independent of any reliance on "holy feet." This term symbolizes both religious and patriarchal establishments. In that vein, Ghosh's film *Ahalya* acknowledges Ahalya's sexual desires and celebrates her as a symbol of a contemporary Indian woman who seeks to assert autonomy over her own sexuality and physicality.

In the film, Ahalya has her husband's support to begin with. He does not discipline his wife for her transgressions. Instead, the one who transgresses is punished by being turned into a stone-symbolizing figurine doll. In all iterations, Rishi Gautam consistently assumes the role of the punisher, directing his curses towards both his wife and Indra. However, in Ghosh's film, there is a notable distinction. Goutam Sadhu does not embody toxic masculinity as the Rishi does. Surprisingly, Sadhu is portrayed as a cunning individual who conspires alongside his wife Ahalya. Ahalya is not depicted as a submissive and seduced wife, but rather as a seductive schemer herself. Furthermore, Sadhu does not subject his own wife to severe punishments while forgiving the man an equal participant by relieving him of his curse because of his supremacy, as Rishi Gautam did.

In the film, the tables are turned. Trapped in the figurine doll, feeling smothered and desperately shouting at the top of their lungs for aid but unheard by everyone, the men who dared to transgress are left for an unknown period to reflect upon their actions and contemplate their destiny. It is both powerfully symbolic and synonymous, mirroring Ahalya's plight of what she must have endured as an unseen being or an inanimate stone, depending on the narratives. The many figurine dolls suggest there were many Indras

and many more to come. However, condemned will be the man and no longer the woman only. Condemned will be those who succumb into sexual urges without any heed to moral obligations. It is no longer Ahalya who will be punished but the Indras who are feeble-minded and give into lust. Ahalya chastising the Indra-doll, “Now don’t you become naughty like others!” (*Ahalya* 13:15) echoes the same. What is worth noticing is that as the film starts all the characters are dressed in white, and the setting has a lighter tone. However, as the film nears its conclusion and the unexpected turn occurs, Ahalya and Goutam Sadhu are portrayed in black attire, accompanied by a somber and darker atmosphere. This signifies a shift in their roles and how they are depicted. It serves as an intriguing metaphor that leaves us to contemplate over the interplay between good and evil within the movie.

Thus, Ghosh’s fourteen-minute short film *Ahalya* gives a modern twist much needed in the classics in the 21st century. Here, Ahalya is aware of her oozing sexuality and takes the reins of what a woman is denied in her own hand. Today’s woman still finds themselves in Ahalya’s shoes, suffering the same fate as they strive to explore their own potential as individuals in their own rights. However, Ghosh treats Ahalya’s sexuality not as something sully but rather as a means of empowerment. Therefore, with times changing the Ahalya trajectory too needs a much-needed change as well. Ghosh’s *Ahalya* highlights the necessity for modern Indian women to seize control of their own destiny in order to bring about meaningful change. Despite the passage of time, the sins and sinners remain unchanged, making it imperative for us to alter the solutions (Mehta).

References:

Bhattacharya, Pradip. “PANCHAKANYA: Women of Substance.” *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 35, no. 1/2, 2000, pp. 13–56. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40873760. Accessed 12 Oct. 2021.

Beauvoir, Simone de, et al. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books, 1989.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. Routledge, 1993.

Cixous, Hélène. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875– 893. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3173239. Accessed 18 Aug. 2020.

Doniger, Wendy. “Sita and Helen, Ahalya and Alcmena: A Comparative Study.” *History of*

Religions, vol. 37, no. 1, Aug. 1997, pp. 21–49. *JSTOR*,
www.jstor.org/stable/3176562.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. 1st American ed., Pantheon Books, 1978.

Ghosh, Sujoy. “Ahalya.” *You Tube*, uploaded by LargeShortFilms, 20 July 2015,
www.youtu.be/Ff82XtV78xo?si=OrhLvdPrpBbVaDg.

Mohapatra, Manorama, and Brajakishore Das. “Ahalya: The Self-Fulfilled.” *Indian Literature*, vol. 36, no. 5, Issue157, 1993, pp. 34–35. *JSTOR*,
www.jstor.org/stable/23339678.

Mehta, Takshi. “Ahalya: Analysing Sujoy Ghosh’s Feminist Take On The Mythological Tale.” *Feminism in India*, 17 Feb. 2021,
www.feminisminindia.com/2021/02/18/ahalya-radhika-apte-feminist-take-mythology/. Accessed 01 Nov. 2023.

Richman, Paula. *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. U of California P, 1991.

Samal, Babru Bahan, translator. *Ahalya: A Woman’s Eternal Quest for Love*. By Pratibha Ray, Createspace Independent Pub., 2018.

Srimad Valmiki Ramayana. 15th ed., Gita Press, 2021.