

Ahalya - Vengeance Against the Patriarchal Dominance

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Abstract

In the current study, I will be discussing about a short film titled “Ahalya” directed by Sujoy Ghosh. With the intention to read the hidden patterns in the film, I resorted to counter-reading the film. At the outset of my study, I found that Ahalya is more of conscious intertextual in nature. It is a story retold and meant to question the patriarchal dominance found in Indian narratives and society at large. Though the story's plot point reflects direct connection with two of the Indian epics Ramayana and Brahma Purana. The story presented in the short film goes beyond what meets the eye, roots of the story even predate to the beginning of yugas to claim its hyperreal world which is presented in the film. Patriarchy is questioned and given an opportunity for Ahalya who is a victim of male dominance. She is all set to avenge. To sum up, it contains the voice for voiceless second gender in India.

Keywords: ahalya, indra, govtama sadhu, avenge, ramayana, Mahabharata, puranas, yugas, patriarchy, gender, dominance

Introduction:

India is a country with colossal cultural richness. People in India are moved by the beliefs and ideologies, which are learnt from the ancient resources, namely Puranas. The way Indian society is organising itself surely is reflecting its great amount of dependence over the Puranas, Ramayana and Mahabharata. Its customs, cultures, values, beliefs, ideologies are hugely derived from the existing ancient resources. Indeed, gender roles and expectations, narratives and folklores are not excluded from the influence of puranas.

India, being on the top in terms of the number of feature films produced per year is under the influence of these ancient literatures. The journey of India Film Industry started with Raja Harischandra (1913) – a full length Indian feature silent film, directed and produced by Dadasaheb Phalke. The story in the film is inspired from Raja Harischandra – a legendary king appeared in several puranas such as Markandeya Purana, Aitareya Brahmana, Devi Bhagavata Purana and Mahabharata. Either the whole narrative, part, patterns, beats – action or narrative and functions of the characters or dramatis personae found in the existing sources have had magnanimous impact on the Indian filmmakers. The kinship between the ancient Indian Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata and Indian films are absolute and indispensable. There are plenty of consciously intertextualised narratives are observed in the Indian Films and upon close reading, you will see the patterns which are unconsciously drawn from the aforesaid sources.

Ahalya – is another short featurette which got influenced by one of the infamous sex scandals found in the puranas. It is observed from the film that the characters in the story are akin to the characters found in the puranas performing the same actual act but with an ingenious bending of characters' functions. Patriarchal dominance in a society like India is strongly rooted since ages and thus there are lot of gender roles defined, and their disparities can be easily identified. Since the classical times, women in India are submissive to men and must deal with lot of expectations from men, satisfying the expectations of men is deemed to be the act of reverence to an Indian woman.

For an instance, 'Karyeshu Dasi, Karaneshu Manthri; Bhojeshu Mata, Shayaneshu Rambha, Roopeshu lakshmi, Kshamayeshu Dharitri, Shat dharmayukta, Kuladharm Pathni' – one of the verses from Nithi Sastra written by a Telugu Poet Baddena. It is a revered rendition by a poet. Framing a woman and her duties and gauging her from the same scale leaves an opportunity for a symposium. Anyone woman who is fall short of one quality is not considered to be an ideal wife.

Karyeshu Dasi – one who works like a servant

Karaneshu Manthri – one who advises like a minister

Bhojeshu Mata – one who cooks and feeds like a mother

Shayaneshu Rambha – one who satisfies the pleasures on bed like heavenly Rambha

Roopeshu Lakshmi – one who maintains posture like goddess Laxmi

Kshamayeshu Dharitri – one who has patience like Earth

Shat dharmayukta – women with all six virtues

Kuladharna Pathni – is indeed a good wife

Assigning duties and responsibilities, framing and gauging woman is a recurring act found in literature from the recent past. Ideal virtues of a woman have found their presence on several occasions. To cite another, Lord Krishna regarded Devi Rukmini has all the six desirable characteristics of an ideal wife, according to Pedha Balasiksha.

Backstory

Lord Brahma – one of the trinity, felt ashamed of seeing Mohini – one of the unaccounted avatars of Lord Vishnu. Mohini avatar came into light during the Ksheerasagara Madhanam, the churning of ocean of milk for the sake of Amrutha – an elixir of eternal life. According to an episode titled Samudra Manthana from Vishnu Purana, Ocean of milk surrounds the Krauncha continent and both gods and demons together happened to churn it for millennium, to see the birth of nectar for immortal life. Lord Vishnu dictates the gods to agree to all the terms of asuras and use Mountain Mandhara and Lord Vishnu's serpent Vasuki as a rope to churn the mountain in the ocean of milk. Lord Vishnu promises to help the gods to acquire all the fruits while asuras (demons) does the working. To manipulate the lust filled asuras, Lord Vishnu takes the form of a Mohini – the most beautiful woman ever. Mohini dances to manipulate the lust filled asuras, while serving amritha – the nectar of immortal life to gods (Hudson 2008: 164-168)

Lord Brahma was witnessing all the action and seeing the most beautiful Mohini avatar and Lord Brahma decides to create his version of most beautiful woman than ever existed. Ahalya – one such creation of Lord Brahma who is known as ayonijasambhava i.e., one who is not born of a woman (Bhattacharya, 2004), she is indeed the most beautiful woman of all the creations of Lord Brahma. For the rearing of Ahalya, Lord Brahma assigned Sadhu Gowthama who is known for ascetism and sexual restraint. Lord Brahma instructed him to bring her back to him at the age comes. Ahalya could able to grab the attention of most of the gods, but it is Indra – the god of thunders and rain and god of gods enamoured of her beauty and couldn't contain himself from wanting her. The time to handover Ahalya to Lord Brahma has come while Lord Brahma was in quest for a suitable and noble man to marry her. After a contest Which Indra is lost. In the same contest, Sadhu Gowthama wins and is found to be a perfect

match for Ahalya in the sight of Lord Brahma and Lord Brahma bestowed Ahalya to Sadhu Gowthama (Wendy 1999, pp89-90). Indra is jilted and still desire for Ahalya. Indra is on a daily watch for the right moment to gratify his pleasures. Indra managed to intimidate moon god. Moon god transforms into a cock and for the first cock's crow, Sadhu Gowthama woke up and started off to holy ganges for the morning prayers. Indra disguised himself as Sadhu Gowthama and subterfuge Ahalya by saying (Goldman 1990, p215).

Shapely woman, men filled with desire do not wait for a woman's fertile period. Fair-waisted woman, I want to make love to you

Though Ahalya sees through the disguise, but consents with Indra. Ahalya's pride in her beauty and curiosity compelled her to satiate the lust of Indra (The Hindu, 2010). Ahalya requested Indra to flee before her husband arrives. While Indra is sneaking out of the place, just arrives Sadhu Gowthama after completing ablutions and morning prayers. Seeing Indra in the act of escape and Ahalya in the state of shock. Sadhu Gowthama curses Indra to lose his testicles and to develop 1000 vulvae on body, thus appears sahasrayoni – a thousand vaginas on Indra appears only to carry the burden of shame, later relieved from 1000 vaginas to 1000 eyes. Sadhu Gowthama out of anger, curses Ahalya as below (Goldman 1990, p216).

You shall dwell in this ashram with nothing to eat, air your only food, suffering, lying on ashes, and invisible to all creatures. 30. Only when Rima, the invincible son of Dasaratha, comes to this dreadful forest, will you be purified.

Ahalya is cursed to become a stone for sixty thousand years and live on nothing but wind, upon hearing the cries and plea from Ahalya. Sadhu Gowthama alters the curse by a boon that she turns into a human form upon the touch of Lord Rama's feet. She leaves the place to become a stone (Wendy 1999, p94). Time came Sadhu Gowthama is overjoyed to accept Ahalya again as his wife after purification through her austerities. (Goldman 1990, p218).

Wonderful! Wonderful!" cried the gods, and they paid homage to Ahalya, once more submissive to Gautama's control, her body purified through the power of her austerities.

The relation between Ahalya and Indra is observed in lot of ancient texts in India. For instance, in the Subrahmanya Formula – a chant performed by priest to invite the main dignitaries like Indra, other gods and brahmans to attend the sacrifice or ritual (Ramani 2016).

*Come, Indra! come owner of the yellow horses!
MeshaVrishanas'va!(person with ram's testicles)
who ascendst the female (avaskandin)!*

lover of Ahalya!

Etymological and Theoretical Framework of Ahalya comes from diverse fields. Ahalya is derived from the two words Ah + Halya that gives aberrant understanding upon close reading of the existing texts. Excerpts of Vaman Apte's Sanskrit to English Dictionary reveals that the term "Ah" is a negation and a prefix and "Halya" signifies ploughing or deformity or ugliness. From the above takings, we can contemplate the true meaning of the term "Ahalya" as "unploughed - untouched" and "no deformity – exquisite" (Apte 2004, p1167).

You will see many voices about the creation of Ahalya. Another account of the creation of Ahalya states that Lord Brahma created Ahalya from the water as an answer to the Urvashi – the prime of apsaras (Ritha 1977). There is another account of Ahalya creation that reflects and endorses the creative ability of Sadhu Gowthama. Bala Kanda – the first of seven kandas, known as sections in Ramayana enunciates that Brahma created Ahalya with great deal out of untainted creative energy (Goldman 1990, p218).

She was like a goddess, and it seemed as if the Creator himself had wrought her, with great effort, out of pure creative energy. She was like a brilliant flame whose form is obscured by smoke.

The unploughed and flawless Ahalya is made fertile by Indra.

It is essential to know the timelines, as this article requires to deal in timelines according to Manusmrithi which is also known as the Manava Dharmasastra is the first constitution of India, the great sages of the time have defined the duties and legal aspects that determine the way the society organised itself at different ages. According to Manusmriti – there are four ages a.k.a yugas as below (Buhler 1886, p8, 85)

One set of duties are prescribed for men at Kritha Yuga, different ones in Treta and in the Dvapara Yuga and again another set for Kali Yuga, in a proportion as their ages decrease in length.

Kritha Yuga consists of four thousand years of the gods (Buhler 1886, p7, 69) and a year of human equals day and night of the gods (Buhler 1886, p7, 67). Krita Yug is followed by Treta Yug, Dvapara Yug and Kali Yug – the four human ages (Buhler 1886, p7, 71). Considering the above, the total numbers of human years in the Krita Yug can be ascertained to 14, 60000 years while assuming western calendar with 365 days a year. With all due respect and humble austerity, Ahalya had to live the punishment for 14,6000 years, until Lord Rama in the Treta

Yug gave her redemption from the pain of long lasted grief and guilt. Sadhu Gowthama loved Ahalya and waited patiently to receive Ahalya back in his life.

Ahalya, directed by Sujoy Ghosh.

Four characters in the short film, Indra Sen, Gowtham Sadhu, Ahalya and Arjun. All the titles are borrowed from the Brahma Purana and Ramayana. Gowtham Sadhu – an artist who is in the act of creation of dolls. Every inch of Ahalya’s beauty inspires him to create flawless dolls made of mud and stone. All his creations are because of her, Gowtham Sadhu mentions exactly at fourth minute fifty-nine second of the short film and again at thirteen minute, fifth second of the short film. All because of Ahalya. Reading beyond the known Ahalya’s story is essential and this short film is one of its kind, it goes beyond the existing material and takes the audience into a different world. A cinematic world in which the couple managed to live through the Kali Yug and take avenged against the lust-filled men. What if the Ahalya and Gowtham Sadhu decides to punish men who commits adultery against woman of other man, is the main plot of the story. Manusmriti characterised Kali Yug – the current times with the dominance of darkness and despair across the earth. It is identified as the time that is also characterised by the reign of chaos, hypocrisy, adharma - practice of irreligious activities. The ideal virtue of the Yuga – truthfulness also known as dharma is personified in the form of a bull. The god of Dharma in the form of a bull was standing on all four legs during the Satya Yug, reduced to three during Treta Yug, reduced to two in the Dvapara Yug and it is in the Kali Yug that the god of dharma is standing only on one foot (Subramaniam 2014, p 59), which implies the desperate need for restoration and protection of good and truthful is of paramount important. Sujoy Ghosh directed Ahalya as a signifier signifies the same. It is an attempt to clean and clear the untruthful and men filled with nothing but lust and vicious adultery. The short film is an ingenious attempt to establish the counter reading of the dominant Ahalya’s story.

It would be incomplete without talking about characters and their functions in the short film. Sibelan Forrester – the editor of Vladimir Propp’s The Russian Folktale opines that function is the action performed by a character for the story to proceed further (Forrester 2012, p80). Not all the actions of the characters performed in the story are accounted as a function. It is the action that is significant in giving new twists and turns to the story.

*We can refer to actions that have significance for the development of the plot as functions
(Forrester 2012, p150)*

Creation of Ahalya, marrying her to Gowtham Sadhu, Indra impersonating as Sadhu and committing adultery with Ahalya – Seduction of Ahalya, Gowtham Sadhu cursing and Ahalya's redemption from the curse are the major actions found in the narrative of actual story. Above are the prominent narrative units that made the whole story. In the short film, it is observed that the functions of the characters are given a twist, but this time Ahalya is relieved from becoming stone and the same stone is used as a metaphor to describe the magical powers Indra once used to get transformed into the form of Sadhu. There is no room for discussing about boon in the entire short film, bane in the actual narrative is swapped in such a way that the men filled with lust and adultery are to become stone for eternity.

Ahalya – A modern twist

The short film clearly indicates a modern-day twist to the conventional narrative of Ahalya (Mehta 2021). Since the beginning of the short film, Ahalya is presented as undeniably beautiful. It is not the Indra who is seductor, it is Ahalya, the seductress in the narrative who casts spell on Indra and lures him towards her beauty. From the first sight of Indra at the door post, she is on a mission to avenge against the men. Gowtham Sadhu and Ahalya are on a mission that resembles a suspense – thriller. In the age of Kali Yug, the vedic paths are forgotten and rejects the ideals and truth, indecorous and wicked ways of life are evident (Subramaniam 2014, p 504). The same is attested in the short film. It is only the Basic Storyline of Ramayana is what the modern-day Indra is aware of. Therefore, though he is a police officer who is expected to preserve and protect the laws and ethics of the time forgets what he is for the flawless beauty of modern-day Ahalya. Sujoy Ghosh analogy of Ahalya to Whiskey in the narrative is fascinating, it is not the whiskey that makes him go trance, indeed the beauty of Ahalya. He rejects whiskey while Gowtham Sadhu offers and not even concerned not of whether he is in duty or not, he goes into the hands of Ahalya and turns out to be a stone and cursed. He lives immovable without a ray of hope.

Profilmic elements in the short film signifies another important aspect of the overall construction of a genre. Characters in the beginning of the short film appears to be wearing bright colours and are abundantly lit to create that mesmerising physical setting. Post that as soon as the reality is observed on the surface, the short film shifts its gear to a thriller, and to signify this the two primary characters in the short film appears wearing black and white.

Conclusion

Unlike the traditional account of Ahalya, where the controls are in the hands of male. The two important male figures in the life story of Ahalya have had their supremacy and control over Ahalya. Ahalya got tempted by Indra, cursed by Gowthama which is seen as the making of a male dominant society or patriarchal society, because Ahalya is not given an opportunity to claim her innocence in the traditional account. She is presented as a submissive persona to her creator, her husband, and her abuser Indra. Though she is blessed to live with the body and beauty of a 16-year-old girl that won't fade to time, her consent to marry Gowtham Sadhu, who is much elder than her age is nowhere accounted in any of the purana. The content of her heart is sheer rejected by her own creator. Sujoy Ghosh's short film is a modern-day reinterpretation of the traditional account. Of all the characters in the short film, Ahalya owns the driving seat and controls the overall act. It is indeed a avenge against the patriarchal dominance.

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