

SUBVERSION OF AHALYA IN SELECTED TEXTS : A STUDY

Project submitted to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala, in partial recognition of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English Language

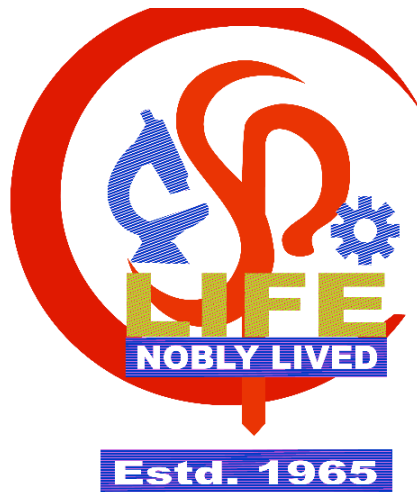
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DEVU RAMESH

REGISTER NUMBER: 170021017772

SIXTH SEMESTER



Department of English

St. Paul's College

Kalamassery

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DECLARATION

I do hereby declare that, the project , **Subversion of Ahalya in Selected Texts: A Study** is a record of genuine research work done by me under the guidance of Dr.. Salia Rex, Head of the Department of English, St. Paul's College, Kalamassery.

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the project work **Subversion of Ahalya in Selected Texts: A Study** is a record of the work carried out by Devu Ramesh under the supervision and guidance of Dr. Salia Rex, Head of the Department of English, St. Paul's College, Kalamassery.

Dr. Salia Rex
Head of the Department
Department of English
St. Paul's College
Kalamassery

Dr. Salia Rex
Project Guide
Department of English
St. Paul's College
Kalamassery

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DEVU RAMESH

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INTRODUCTION

The Dissertation attempts to explore the subverted mythical personality ‘Ahalya’ from the legendary text Ramayana. The study examines literary texts that have challenged and tried to question and subvert popular myth by portraying the mythical character ‘Ahalya’ specifically in order to analyze the subversion of the character.

Subversive literature has been a worthy tool in a rebel’s arsenal throughout the history of mankind. It refers to a process by which the values and principles of a system in place are contradicted or reversed, in an attempt to transform the established social order and its structures of power, authority, hierarchy and social norms. Subversive literature is a systematic attempt to overthrow or undermine a government or political system by persons working secretly from within.

Ancient myths acquire validation only when it is revisited and interpreted with alternate viewpoints. Literature has a broad spectrum of perceptions concerned with different themes that the text encapsulates within itself. This project attempts to bring in the inner textual elements that are evident in the myth of Ahalya often regarded as the part of the great epic Ramayana, composed by Valmiki in the estimated period of around 500B.C. Here it is brought out through the subversion of the character ‘Ahalya’ concerning the text *Ahalya’s Awakening* by Kavitha Kane, the short film *Ahalya* by Sujoy Ghosh and a short story *Silaroopini (The Stone Woman)* by K B Sreedevi in detail. In these we find how the same story is interpreted in three different ways.

The popular definition of ‘myth’ refers to the traditional stories consisting of historical events that explain the origin of certain cultural practices or any natural phenomenon. The word ‘myth’ originated from the Greek word ‘mythos’ which means sacred stories or tale of gods passed down from generation to generation. The Indian epics mainly Ramayana and Mahabharatha that encompassed many of the commonly believed

myths of the time, were known as 'Ithihasa' (History). These epics serve as both religious scriptures and a rich source of philosophy and morality. Myths, however have an additional function, which according to Alan Swingewood (1977), is "to eliminate the historical basis of institutions and process and create within popular consciousness and acceptance of inevitable facts of class inequality and power" (p.116). This brings us to the relationship between myth and ideology which appear to be inextricably linked. Terry Eagleton (1976) defines ideology as "that complex structure of social perception which ensures that the situation in which our social class has power over the others is seen by most members of the society as natural or not seen at all" (6).

There were many versions of these myths attempted by various writers, coming up with new perspectives and fresh angles of reading. Such writers tried to deconstruct these epics by bringing the weak sections of the epics to the forefront.

Ahalya is a mythical personality from Ramayana. She is also one among the Panchakanyas, other kanyas are Tara, Sita and Mandodri from Ramayana and Draupadi from Mahabharatha. Ahalya is the wife of Gauthama Maharshi; 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 around the three worlds would win the hand of Ahalya. Lord Indra felt he was the only worth to win the test. Immediately he goes around the world with his magical power. However Sage Narada said that Rishi Gautham 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 the three worlds, by this Gautham came through the three worlds during his prayers. So Ahalya was married to older Gautham. However the divine beauty of Ahalya had attracted the attention of all the Devas and Asuras by then. Moreover, she was blessed that she would

always have the body and beauty of a 16 year old girl. Even after Lord Brahma had married her to the pure of heart sage Gautham, Indra, the king of gods, kept following her.

Indra also watched the habits of the sage and noticed that the sage left his ashram at the dawn of each day. He went away for a couple of hours to the river for his bath and prayers. Unable to bear the pangs of love anymore, Indra decided to attain the woman of his heart by subterfuge. Indra convinced the moon to take the form of a cock and wake up Gautham Rishi much before dawn. On hearing the voice of a cock crowing too early, the sage went for his holy dip. Indra descended to Earth in the guise of Gautham Rishi and stealthily entered the hut. He demanded of Ahalya to make love to him. Ahalya being consort of a powerful yogi, had spiritual powers and was able to see that, he who stood in front of her was not her yogi husband, but the king of gods Indra himself.

However, it flattered her that the great deva found her so charming that he ran the risk of being condemned by the worlds and yet came to her asking her for her love. She smiled at him, too pleased to refuse him his inappropriate request. Indra, taking advantage, further seduced her, using sweet lines in praise of her exquisite form. She gave in and two committed sin. After this act of romantic consummation was performed, however Ahalya regained her senses and she asked Indra to leave immediately.

With his lust having being fulfilled, Indra now really scared of sage Gautham's wrath, hurried to make his exist, but the sage arrived just then with his garments still wet from his ablutions. He took one look at them and realized all that had transpired. As expected, rage erupted on the rishi's countenance and he was quick to curse his wife, the moon and Indra. That is why the moon carries spots, as a penalty for the part it played in the sin.

Rishi Gautham, the cuckolded husband cursed Indra to have a thousand vulvas all over his body and to lose his testicles; he was made completely powerless and determined that his throne would be forever insecure, always susceptible to attacks, whereas Ahalya who

was innocent, had sinned with her body, cursed to become a stone and she would return to her human form only after being graced by Rams' (one of the avatar's of lord Vishnu) foot. Ram and Lakshman first came across the hermitage of Ahalya on their way to Mithilapuri with sage Viswamithra. They enquired about the hermitage to the sage who told them the pathetic story of Ahalya. Ram entered the hermitage and saw the stone and touched with his foot. The stone transformed into the beautiful Ahalya who had become unadulterated and understood her sins and Ram blessed Ahalya. Though the curse varies from text to text, almost all versions describe Lord Ram as the liberator of Ahalya from her curse.

Though Hindu mythology continues to remain a preferred genre, contemporary interest in Hindu mythology adopts a different approach and is consumed in different ways unique to the times. Contemporary writing of Hindu mythology do not treat it as a sacrosanct text; there are creative interpretations and the stories analyzed and dissected delve into ambiguous areas and derived meanings are corroborated by discussions and dialogues of readers, thinkers and academicians. The epics are interpreted in a way that makes them less godly and more human. The protagonist possesses all human emotions including the weaker ones. Their struggles and battles may not always seen driven by higher purpose. The narrative of myths have changed as universal journey of characters are retold from individual's point of view. These bring out the human side of the gods and has made it possible for readers to relate to them in newer ways. The characters are critiqued, scrutinized; story plots are questioned and connected with contemporary ideologies and issues. Books like *The Krishna Key* by Ashwin Sanghi goes back and forth in time, from Krishna's life (from birth to death) and to contemporary times, when a killer believes himself to be the Kalki avatar, Amish Tripathi's *The Siva Trilogy* that recreates Siva, Sathi and other related mythological characters are humans, Krishna Udayashankar's *The Aryavatha Chronicles* too relate mythological characters with human situations and sensibilities.

Contemporary retelling also attempts a version of feminist revisionist mythology that aims at a strategic revisionist use of gender imagery to transform culture and subvert the heritage that women inherit. Devadutt Patnaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana*, Moyna Chitrakar and Samhitha Arni's *Sita's Ramayan* explore Ramayana from Rama's abandoned queen's perspective, Sujoy Ghosh's short film *Ahalya* inverts the story of sage Gautham's wife, *Palace of Illusion* by Chithra Banerjee Divakaruni revisits Mahabharatha from the perspective of Draupadi and Kavitha Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen* are few examples of popular literature that weave the threads of sexuality and feminism in the narration of myths.

Of all the characters of Hindu mythology the most popular role model all women seek to emulate is undoubtedly Sita. The epitome of sacrifice, chastity and virtue, Sita is glorified because she unquestioningly follows her husband into exile and remains devoted to him despite the hardship she has to endure. Bina Aggarwal (1988), analyzes the character of Sita in her *Sita Speak*. The poem is a series of questions posed to Sita, who is urged to put an end to her silence and speak out her side of the story.

The post-modernist attempt at re-writing and re-reading of texts can be better looked at from a subverted point of view. It is not only seen in the subversion of female characters but also in the unsung male characters too. In *Second Turn (Randamoozham)* M T Vasudevan Nair, makes a thematic shift. From this characteristic chronicling of life in the joint family of the matrilineal "tharawad" in Kerala and its crumbling feudal status, he moves into the world of epic, the Mahabharatha. By bringing down the characters, like Bhima, from epic height and presenting them in a familial or familiar setting, M. T has done a demystification of the epic. Here it discusses M T's *Second Turn* as a post-modernist rewriting the epic from the point of view of Bhima as the recast hero in a "narrative of subversion". M T's retelling of the Mahabharatha as Bhima's narrative is juxtaposed with the portrayal of Bhima in the other

two narratives or fictional interpretations of the Mahabharatha in Malayalam; Kuttikrishna Marar's *A Journey through the Mahabharatha (Bharathaparydanam)* and P K Balakrishnan's *Now Let Me Sleep (Ini Njan Urangatte)*

Chapter 1

MYTH AND SUBVERSION THEORY

Subversive literature has been used to great effect by writers and poets who were looking to create awareness against social injustices, blind old beliefs or even questionable morals. The standout feature of subversive literature is the manner in which it challenges authority. It is traditionally associated with the challenging of a dominant worldview; the act of trespassing against accepted social and organizational mores. It is all about not accepting things at the face, value but to explore investigate and validate the truth in order to put it out there. “To subvert” is a transitive verb: it requires an object, which in linguistics is called a referent.

In theory, subversion is universal: anything can be overturned, not only in the material domain, but also particularly in the spiritual one: subversion is an eminently moral act. Indeed if subversion were not possible, the freedom of the human mind would stand in doubt. Even when subversion is materially represented, it owes its true value to the spiritual derivative. Our present problem is to study the subversive relationship that exists between myth and the contemporary novel. Using an analytical approach, we first illustrate the primary aspects of myth subversion, then its connection to the novel. Myth is relatively a simple oral narrative of an extraordinary event with a transcendent and personal referent, theoretically lacking historical evidence and comprising a ritual, a series of constant components, and a conflictive, functional and etiological nature. In their work *Neoliberalism, subversion and democracy in India*, Portelli and Konecny (2013) trace the historical root of the word subversion and stated:

While subversion tends to carry negative connotations in everyday discourse, etymologically the word is rooted in the Latin words *sub* (under) and *vertere* (to turn around or over). Since *the word subversion means 'to turn or change from the bottom*

or foundation' [it] is not necessarily vicious. In other words, subversion means to change from below, to turn around or redirect from underneath, and is not necessarily a negative, aggressive, or vindictive act. It could, alternatively, be that through subversive acts, something harmful or negative is undone. When it comes to relations of social power, oppressive government institutions or policies, or systemic structures that disenfranchise particular groups of people, effective subversion is an undertaking that can have especially positive results. (94)

Subversion is a necessary tool for survival and opening up of new possibilities in the context of the 21st century where neoliberalism and its extreme market-driven ideologies and institutional practices and power relations permeate and impact all social settings, public and private, ranging from everyday interactions and decision-making to institutionalized laws, policies and practices. Subversion is subtle mechanism(s) of resisting abusive forms of power that create and/or maintain oppressions. Subversion is form of resistance, yet not all acts of resistance are identical to the acts of subversion. The objective of subversion is to stand up to injustice and inequitable practices as a means of rupturing the status quo, in the process preventing and/or reducing to self, others, and members of the community.

Defining the notion of myth, M H Abrams writes:

In classical Greek, 'mythos' signify any story or plot, whether true or invented. In its central modern significance, however, a myth is one story in mythology- a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of intention and action of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do to provide the rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the solutions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. (170)

Thus it becomes very clear that the idea of myth is closely related to the concept of mythology, hereditary, culture and religion. Rajagopalachari observes that “Mythology is an integral part of religion. It is as necessary for religion and national culture as the skin and skeleton that preserves a fruit with its juice and taste” (xx). However, G S Krik believes that myths do not validate culture or vice-versa (Burkholder, 58). But Rajagopalachari again says that and one can believe that “Mythology and the holy figures are necessary for any great culture to rest on its stable spiritual foundation and function as a life giving inspiration and guide” (xx).

Most of the writers who have retold or subverted myths have done with a different purpose. The subversion and retelling of myths provide us with a sense being important not only on the ground of political, social or imperial power, but also being rich in tradition, culture and history. It provides us with a feeling of pride to be a part of such a land where such great mythical characters have proved their valor.

The writers in the postcolonial space, voice against the dominant discourses of the center by evolving counter hegemony. The essential corpus of the dominant discursive practices seem to evoke a sense of subversion; an attempt to reconstruct the defined notions by the center among leading men of letters from “once colonized countries” such as R K Narayan, Nayanthara Sangal, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh etc. John Macleod [2000:34] asserts “Rethinking conventional modes of reading is fundamental to post colonialism”. The advent of newer critical inquires in the realms of literature, arts, sociology, history, the institutionalized and canonical notions seek to abort the deterministic concepts and by revising, reinterpreting and re-approaching, the writers attempt to subdue unrealized intentions imbibed in the consciousness. The officious decorum of History, Culture, Science, Ethics and Morality are shaped and shuffled. In doing so, the writers eventually transfix all-encompassing cultural traditions. Often writers experiment on the peculiar narrative framework which would help them bring to light all these unrealized, unfelt segments of

truth. Subversive literature is controversial since its job is to pink on authority or authoritarian figures, but at its heart, remains a unified goal- the one which urges people to think and review their surroundings, and to standup for what is right. Subversive writers and poets are those, who are deeply affected by the general state of affairs which plague the society, and only seek to create a sense of awareness among people. Through their writing, the hope to convey the message that rules need not be accepted as they are, and that they need to be scrutinized before being accepted.

Myth which plays an important role in shaping the cultural heritage of a nation, functions as a significant tool for patriarchy (the dominant group) for imposing its ideology on women (the subordinate group). It does so by providing women with a series of models who are glorified, revered and rewarded precisely because they uphold the morals of patriarchy. Myths also provide contrasting images of evil women who transgresses from the roles assigned to them and are punished for their deviant behavior. The “good” woman like Sita in Ramayana is passive, submissive, docile and self-sacrificing and devoted to her husband, while the “evil” woman, like Surpanaka is sexually aggressive and assertive. Patriarchy is therefore is very clear in its stipulations of the qualities that a woman should and should not possess.

However, if myth has been used as a tool by patriarchy to impose its ideology on women, it has also been used as an area of negotiation, conflict and contestation by the subordinate group. The control of myth therefore is very significant for the achievement of some kind of cultural hegemony. As is seen historically, for a subordinate culture to establish its status, it needs to gain control of a myth by undermining and demythifying the “original” or popular myth.

Chapter 2

REDEMPTION OF AHALYA

Kavitha Kane is a former journalist and the bestselling author of five books. She is considered as a revolutionary force in Indian writing because she has brought in feminism where it is most needed; mythology. Her five novels are all based on women in Indian mythology: *Karna's Wife* (2013); *Sita's Sister* (2014), on Ramayana's most neglected character, Urmila; *Menaka's Choice* (2016), on the apsara Menaka; *Lanka's Princess* (2016), on the female antagonist in the Ramayana, Surpanaka; and *The Fisher Queen's Dyansty* (2017) on Sathyavathi, the grand matriarch in the Mahabharatha.

History was about to repeat itself. The newly appointed Indra, king of heavens, desired his queen Indrani. Nahusha, the king of the Aila dynasty, coveted sachi, wife of former Indra Shakra. He was compelled to renounce his throne after a horrifying curse, leading to his downfall. It rendered him powerless, turned his body into a thousand vulvas, and his throne remained forever insecure. "She is the wife of another, you cannot have her," Rishi Brihaspathi reasoned with the new king, but Indra was adamant. "I can and I shall", he stated when a soft voice said, "Don't".

Menaka, the ethereal apasara, had glided into the courtroom to warn Nahusha of the toll his intransigence would invite, not only from the king, but also from Indralok, as it had happened once before. To him, she narrated the story of Ahalya.

Thus begins Kavitha Kane's mythological tale of the first of the five virgins or *panchakanyas*- archetypes of female chastity in Indian mythology- revered for her purity, yet condemned on account of her infidelity. *Ahalya's Awakening*, as the author notes, traces the paradox of its eponymous protagonist, who "deemed promiscuous", and yet, is seen as a symbol of chastity.

In the book, Ahalya's story takes off from her infancy, right up to the point where she blossoms into her extraordinary beauty and intelligence, after a childhood spent under the wings of sage vashist and Bharadwaj. This is followed by her subsequent departure to Rishi Gautham's hermitage. Yearning for an identity independent for her physicality, here she urges to become a learned *rishika*, and immerses herself in the study of scriptures and Vedas.

In Ahalya's Awakening, Kane's Ahalya story is not just about Rishi Gautham who cursed his wife Ahalya and turned her into a stone for her infidelity. Nor is it just about Ahalya the woman turned into a stone to be later freed from the curse, by Rama. This small episode, seemingly mere mention, has huge impact in the later narrative of the epic, almost like a precursor to what is to come and become of the protagonist Sita. "The complexity and depth of marital relationships and adultery are inexorably layered. This brief incident should be seen in its larger implications, emphasizing its relevance in society caught in conflict of not just adultery and loyalty, but of justice and the act of judging and judgement and being judgmental."

Of Ahalya the author says: "She is an enigma, almost a silent woman, known essentially for her seduction by Indra, her curse by her husband Rishi Gautham for infidelity, and her liberation from that curse by Ram."

In the story, Kane reveals that Ahalya is the princess of Panchal, daughter of the great King Mudgal and queen Nalayani. Created by Lord Brahma himself she was named 'Ahalya' by Rishi Vashisht which means the beautiful one without blemishes. She is the most beautiful girls to be created to step into the earth. She is born as a twin along with her brother Divodas and even at a very young age she is extremely smart and very inquisitive about the world. As she grows older she wants to devote her life to studying and gaining knowledge and she does not want to be married off like a mere other woman.

When Divodas went to fight the war, he takes the help of Lord Indra and the two of them become very good friends. After the war is over, Divodas brings Indra back home where Indra sees Ahalya and he suddenly falls madly in love with her. Ahalya is not interested in Indra at all and not even at the prospect of marriage in general; even though her family is pressuring and persuading her into it. As an alternate, Ahalya goes to Gautham Rishi's ashram where she wants to learn more from him, but at the same time she slowly starts to fall in love with Gautham Rishi as well. As the story progresses, we see how this turns into a kind of a love triangle between Indra and Ahalya and Gautham and how the choices that they make and the decisions that they come to each other's lives.

The story is very much down to earth and characters are very realistic. In this book the author uses the metaphor of Gautham treating Ahalya like stone where he does not show her any love or compassion and due to which she makes one mistake in the story. She is also thrown out like a stone where people don't even give a second thought about her. Ahalya is a very strong character in the story as she comes across as a very unique person who is independent and she wants to devote her life to learning and gaining more knowledge. Her fault found is, when she reaches the ashram, she loses her focus and falls in love and decides to become a wife and mother instead. Unfortunately it did not end well for her in this case, which is quite relatable to the present situation of women also. There are many women who want to pursue their career and want to be independent and make something out of their life but because of the repressions of society they have to become someone's wife, mother and so on and in turn they lose all their hopes and desires.

Contrary to the traditional portrayal, in the book, the gorgeous Ahalya is vivacious, stubborn and extraordinary and speaks her mind. When Ahalya affirmed that she knew the man who seduced her was not her yogi husband, Gautham says: "I cursed him, Ahalya, to a miserable life- but you, you, Ahalya, had enough powers in you to stop and curse him! You

are not just my wife, you are a powerful yogi yourself. But desire overcame the spirit. The desire of the flesh took over the spirit of the mind and soul". (Kane 318) And her reply was "But you just did not want". After long years of Ahalya's and Gautham's marital relationship and having three children, Gautham lost the concern and interest in Ahalya day by day and he got engaged himself in his intellectual needs alone. He became busy with his students and in the establishment of new hermitages nearby. Ahalya could do nothing but stare blankly around the empty spaces around her. This was the way it had been for so many years yet she didn't stop hoping for the best. Knowing the explanation of her uneasiness, Ahalya made her way to library. She knew she wouldn't be able to sleep if she remained in bed. She proceeded with her days work and then the time passed like it did on any other day in the last few years. She worked the whole day and nights were spent wondering when Gautham would join her in her bed, hoping, aching, till her waiting eyes shut in weary sleep. In the meantime Gautham was back and she could feel the hard strength of his body against hers. She touched his bare shoulders, her fingers caressing his warm skin, but Gautham turned over brusquely. Her hands turned into fists as she felt another surge of hot blood move down inside her. Gautham had rebuffed her again. Perhaps it was only his passion for work and ambition that excited him now. Hot tears rose to her eyes and spilled over. The next day Ahalya addresses her worries and asks him whether he have noticed that he has a wife who is morose, moody and miserable. She remarks that they haven't made love since Anjani (their third child) was born. And she is six years old now. She faltered, emptied of her anger, humiliation replaced rage. She says that she is a "normal" woman with "normal" needs. This is the point where she realizes that she is alone in every aspects. Neither her husband nor her children is with her. Hesitantly she realized that she wants Indra, she admitted to herself at last. For the first time Ahalya had recognized Indra as a man. His image came to mind instantly: handsome, young, erotic- male beauty in all its virile splendor. When the strain of marriage affects Gautham's

duties and causes sage Gautham and Ahalya to drift apart, Indra discovered the want and loneliness in Ahalya and she falls into his arms knowingly, giving into the charms of the man who has been in hot pursuit of her ever since their eyes met for the first time long ago in a palace courtyard. “You are beautiful, oh-so beautiful!” Indra said thickly” (Kane, 311). The desire in his voice excited her. She couldn’t remember when Gautham had last spoken like that to her. This act could be seen as the failure of a husband in understanding and meeting the needs of a wife. When Gautham recognized Ahalya’s act to being with Indra, he confessed that he didn’t try to resolve their difference and problems in their life.

“I am not an infallible being, I am not a god, I am a woman” (Kane, 321) Ahalya said furiously. A spasm of pain contorted Gautham’s face and said that he failed to gauge her emotions in his self-absorption. “Man believes he is free to do what he wants. He can explore lands and knowledge and passion all so easily. Not so a woman. She is not allowed to be free. Like other men I treated you not as a wife but as most men treat most women: I thwarted you, made you inert and compliant, and restricted you to home-keeping and legal subordination. *Me,*’ he said contemptuously. ‘*Me,* who made laws for women so they could uphold their rights.....I couldn’t cherish my wife” (Kane, 324). He says. “We are cursed, Ahalya,” he said. “We have punished each other too long- in our ignorance, in our passion...” (Kane, 324) Ahalya says that she is the promiscuous wife and Gautham the wronged husband. “That cheating is cheating, and there is no justification to it! It is cruel, it is selfish, it is dishonest, it is abusive!” she cried. ”It is my fault” (Kane, 325). She then reminded him of her disempowered position as his wife, her resentment and repressed anger, her struggle to avoid conflict and the claustrophobia she felt. She mumbled, her voice breaking “I wanted a man, my man to make love to me....in that search, I got lost” (Kane, 325). “Yes I know” he said after a strained pause. Gautham tells her that he is as guilty as she is and they need to look

within their hearts and minds and make their own amends, cleansing themselves in the process and finally achieving tranquility.

Ahalya and Rishi Gautham realize they both have failed each other and their marriage. Rishi Gautham leaves her with a blessing/curse of finding herself. “She was motionless, senseless to the outer world. She was a pariah: quickly repositioned from devoted wife to adulteress. Gautham had left her, retreating to the mountains for his enlightenment, hoping she would find her own one here. Was it his blessing or his curse?” (p.330). The world saw it as a curse, and the fact that he had left the ashram seemed to confirm the rumor that he had left her for good. It was her absurd dreams of passion, romance and impossible love. In sheltering those broken dreams and passions, she had tried to seek solace for her own expectations. That momentary weakness, that small slip that led to her big fall. She found herself frozen into stone, not in defense against the insinuations and barbs, but in the hopeful quest that she would seek her sense to revel in it. That same that once revered her as Rishi Gautham’s wife, the mother of the ashram.

Gautham had claimed he did not hold her guilty, but the world did by the fact that he left her. It was his action that condemned her, as much as her infidelity. He was not condemned for his redemption, she was.

Ahalya was meditated to stone and was revived when prince Ram touches her for seeking her blessing. When Rishi Gautham had come to take her back, Ahalya had not returned because she thought they had changed as people.

Sita meeting Ahalya at the end is a biggest irony of Indian culture and patriarchy that the author has portrayed. *Ahalya’s Awakening* is about an inevitable metamorphosis that bounds the life of every human physically, emotionally and spiritually and shows how the breaking of the cocoon to fly free as a butterfly for a human involves years of toil and turmoil only to end up finding that the real truth is within you .

Chapter 3

REVENGE OF AHALYA

Ahalya is a 2015 Bengali short film directed by Sujoy Ghosh with Soumithra Chatterjee, Radhika Apte and Tota Roy Chowdhury playing the leading roles. The film is produced by Royal Stag Barrel Select Large Short films.

The film begins with the sound of a calling bell and a young police man, Indra Sen arrives at the home of famous ageing artist, Gautham Sadhu, to investigate the case of a missing man named Arjun. He is greeted by young and beautiful wife Ahalya. Indra sees an array of realistic looking dolls on a mantelpiece, and notices that one looks almost identical to Arjun. A stone which is encased in glass is also placed there. One of the dolls falls over and Ahalya chastises the figure before placing back with the others. She attributes this sudden movement to the wind from the ceiling fan. Ahalya serves tea to the men and subtly flirts with Indra in the presence of her husband. She then turns upstairs to her room but forgets her mobile phone on table. Indra asks Gautham about Arjun, a model who has not been seen since working for the artist. Gautham tells Indra that the stone in the glass case has magical powers and that anybody who touches it turns into whosoever he or she wishes. He tells Indra that Arjun knew of the stone and suggests that he may have used it.

Indra does not believe him initially and tries to arrest him suspecting him who behind the missing of Arjun. But later Indra agrees to what he said and tried it. Ahalya calls down to her husband to bring her mobile phone to her. Gautham instructs to Indra to hold the stone and imagine himself to be Gautham, taking the mobile phone up to Ahalya. He does so. Entering the bedroom, Indra sees himself as he truly is, but his reflection is that of Gautham. Ahalya speaks to Indra as if he were her husband, and instructs him to get rid of the police officer, and hurry back to bed with her. Indra steps into the hallway momentarily but then returns to the room to romantically embrace Ahalya.

The scene cuts away to Indra being in a dark area, restrained and unable to move. His screams are unheard as he is now trapped within a new doll, which sits with the collection of other dolls on the mantelpiece. As he struggles, his doll falls over and is picked up and reprimanded by Ahalya.

Radhika Apte as Ahalya, based on the Hindu mythological character Ahalya.

Soumithra Chatterjee as Gautham Sadhu, an artist and Ahalya's husband, based on the sage Gautham Maharishi.

Tota Roy Chowdhury as the policeman Indra Sen, based on Lord Indra.

Ayushman Mithra as Arjun.

The film takes elements from the mythological story of Ahalya from Ramayana but crafts a modern version of it with a spin. In the original tale young and beautiful Ahalya is seduced by Indra and is cursed by much older husband sage Gautham to turn into a stone. But in the retelling of the story in the film, the punishment is visited on the character based on Indra alone, while the woman is shown to be an accomplice in the seduction game.

There are many versions of the story, but in all of them Ahalya is the one who is severely punished for the infidelity. Sujoy has taken the mythical story and given an inverted twist to it in the 14 minutes film. The film also has shades of Sathyajith Ray's short story *Professor Shonku and Strange Dolls (Professor Shonku O Ashorju Putul)*. All the actors have done a commendable job in the film, which has many close-up-shots. Radhika Apte is convincing as the beautiful Ahalya. Not only the policeman, Indra Sen, even the viewers are not able to take eye off her. It seems a cakewalk for Soumithra Chatterjee. He maintained the air of mystery till the end, and fits into the role of the mischievous old husband.

The motifs in the film have complimented the suspense splendidly. All the characters wear white outfits in the beginning of the film, and even the lamps and surroundings are in the lighter shades, which is very new for a suspense thriller. In the end, once the suspense is

revealed, Ahalya and her husband are seen in black. A good play on the good/bad metaphor by the director.

Ahalya, the critically acclaimed short film, is known to demolish the gender constructs of the age old myth of Ahalya. The paper tries to crack the overt meaning of the short film by reading between the dialogues and deconstructing the idea of the pseudo feminism in the short film *Ahalya* by Sujoy Ghosh.

The film by subverting the role of male character by making it seem submissive as compared to the female character's role seem to be just a surface level reading of the text. It seems that Sujoy Ghosh has played not just with the changing the paradigm, but also trying to alter the history by doing so. The age old myth of putting Ahalya as part of the five virgins of Hindu mythology is explored in the paper. The film blinds the viewer in the first watch to fall for the female sexuality, which is reflected in the opening scene itself where she opens the gate for the police man Indra sen (representing god Indra who seduced her) who is charmed by her white dress. While in Hindu mythology, stands for mourning, and this can be a hint towards the prophecy of what is about to come. Ahalya, bold, strong and confident in this scene seems to be in total ownership of her sexual identity. Further, as the film progresses, control of Ahalya over her acts becomes even more dominant. In the myth of Ahalya, Gautham Maharishi, her husband, who wins her by Brahma's courtesy, curses her of her infidelity. She is then turned into a stone because of the curse and is redeemed when Lord Ram's foot brushes the stone. In the film, it is with the help of Ahalya that Gautham Sadhu turns Indra Sen into a stone doll. Ahalya is seen as a seductress who bewitches Indra Sen and because the latter falls for the trap laid by the husband-wife duo, he is turned into a doll. The attempt made by this paper is to read Ahalya as a character of the stand in wife who is yet again a power in the play of Gautham's revenge from Indra (who in the myth is able to escape from any curse or punishment for the act). It therefore reverts the idea which was till

now been satisfied by the film and attempts to study the subversion and inversion this film appropriates.

Ghosh must be given credit for being creative and turning the tale upside down and borrowing motifs from it to tell a new story.

The main difference in Ghosh's retelling of the tale is that Gautham Sadhu (the Maharishi) is not the cuckold husband. Instead he is the schemer and Ahalya is his co-conspirator. Poor Indra is the one who being fooled here. Sadhu encourages Indra's lust and sends him to Ahalya only to turn him into a doll carved of a rock- a rather extreme punishment for a spot, of adultery that too engaged in under some degree of duress. Ahalya is complicit in the entire drama.

K B Sreedevi, a prominent short story writer and novelist in Malayalam has also used Ahalya myth as a reference point and written a short story named *Silaroopini* in 1993 (*The Stone Woman*) where she subverts the Ahalya myth. Sreedevi was born into an orthodox Namboothiri family, steeped in Vedic learning, in northern Kerala. Among the many short stories she has published, she has shown particular interest in the unpopular characters from the Ramayana narrative. The story translated *Woman of Stone* or *The Stone Woman*, takes place after Ahalya has been released from Gautham's curse and is travelling through the forest to attend a ritual at Vamiki's ashram. The short story also includes some flashbacks to earlier moments in Ahalya's life. Here, she has linked the original story to a later event, that is, Ram forsaking his pregnant wife Sita, in the forest and sage Valmiki giving her protection. Rama forsaking Sita in the forest is the theme of *Uttararamayanam* (a sequel of the original Ramayana). But Ahalya's appearance in this part of the story is Sreedevi's creation. Ahalya remembers Ram and his compassion for her while he redeemed her from stonehood to womanhood, that is, she is filled with awe at the first memory of Ram, who had brought her back to life. "One could go on listening to that voice which resonated like the peal of temple

bells. The moment she saw him she knew that her long penance had not been in vain. She was drowned in the heavenly pleasure evoked by his gentleness” (p.48). She compares him to her “detached and saintly husband” (p.51), who, she observes, is “incapable of uttering such (gentle) words” because he has “mastered the art of the all-destructive curse” (p.48), and wonders who is the more compassionate of the two. It is openly hinted that she found her husband wanting as a “true” man. This is quite uncommon for an Indian woman for whom the husband (*pati*) is supposed to represent a *devta* (god), and so beyond any criticism. This is a big step forward. Ahalya gave shape to her perception of an “ideal man”- a gentle, compassionate loving human being, quite the opposite of the accepted ideal of manhood, who is an aggressive macho man.

Sreedevi’s Ahalya is different from the mythical heroine, Ahalya. She is more critical and not subservient and self-abnegating. The story is taken to another level when Ahalya hears that Ram, her ideal man, had forsaken his wife. Her illusion of Ram as the ideal man, the epitome of compassion and greatness, however, is shattered when she hears that he has forsaken his pregnant wife, Sita on flimsy ground. “The fire has abandoned its own flame”, she mourns and laments that “Nature [is] deserted by its protector” (p.52). The irony of the situation is that Ram, the only man who has the power to bring her back to life, the “protector” of nature, questions the chastity of his virtuous wife and abandons her. He thus seems to be no different from her own husband who cursed her and turned her into stone. It is here that Sreedevi’s story deviates from the myth. Rather than be indebted to a man who has been unjust to his wife, Ahalya rejects the salvation he offers her, an expressing her solidarity with Sita, turns back into stone.

There is subtle questioning of our usual notions as- a stone has no feelings, it is a block of unfeeling mass whereas a human being endowed with a heart and emotions has feelings. So we assume it is better to be a human being than a stone. Sreedevi makes her

Ahalya projects a view without feelings towards fellow human beings, he/she becomes in effect a stone. Ahalya's strain of thought was, "I was cursed because I was unfaithful to my husband; what about Sita who was faithful to her husband?" The conclusion she arrives at is that men would always be unjust and unfair to women while fulfilling their own self-centered, selfish objectives and dreams. She wanted to abdicate such a world and thereby assert her solidarity with another suffering woman. She thus challenges the false morals and values imposed upon women by a patriarchal system where a woman must constantly prove her purity and chastity to the world. This is also a case of literature using the mythical story to subvert traditional patriarchal values and reinforce a pro vision.

CONCLUSION

'I searched all these years for myself- and I only found Ahalya, the woman I was supposed to be born as: unblemished, without any faults. I had no hala in me, no sin, no crime, no guilt. What I had done was to respond to the call of life within me...' (Kane, 345).

Ahalya created by Brahma; married to one of the greatest rishis of all times; desired by the king of gods, Indra. A woman maligned and crushed. But who was Ahalya? What did she want? Did she have ambitions and desires? Ahalya, the epitome of impeccable beauty and youth married to the old ascetic Gautham Rishi. The allure of the unknown in the form of the celestial god Indra is hard to resist and she finds herself succumbing to his advances despite seeing through his disguise. The Brahmanas (a) (9th to 6th centuries BCE) are the earliest scriptures to hint the relationship with Indra. In the Skanda Purana, "Ahalya smells Indra's celestial fragrance" (pp.96-7, 321-2). In Kamban's 12th century Tamil adaptation of the Ramayana, the Ramavatharam, narrates that Ahalya realizes that her lover is an imposter but continues to enjoy the dalliance. The *Kathasaritasagara* (11th century CE) is also one of the few texts that mirrors the Bala Kanda's Ahalya and says that Ahalya makes a conscious choice of copulating with Indra. (Ramanujan 1991, pp.28-32).

Later retellings however mythicize her and make her the symbol of the eternally chaste. She is silenced, petrified and thus objectified by a male (by the curse of rishi) and can be redeemed ironically only through the divine touch of another man. Again, in the subversion of her tale, the qualities that are eternalized and make her memorable and a part of Indian collective unconscious are her patience, her ready resignation to the punishment given to her by her enraged husband and her years of passivity and penance and ultimate redemption at the hands of Ram. It is interesting to note that although the Bala Kanda mentions that Ahalya consciously commits adultery, the Uttara Kanda of Ramayana and Puranas (compiled between the 4th and 16th centuries CE) '.....absolves her of all guilt and

declare her a passive victim who falls prey to Indra's passion and manipulations.' (Ray, 2007. pp.25). Subsequent retellings of her story glorify her as a woman epitomizing chastity so much so that she is the first amongst the five virgins of panchakanya to be worshipped by orthodox Hindus. (Battacharya, March –April 2004, pp.4-7).

The novel *Ahalya's Awakening* an extraordinary retelling of Ahalya myth in Ramayana, has succeeded in creating elements of love, marriage, tragedy and identity into one complete composition that has touched every aspects of life. In this sparkling retelling of the well-known legend, the bestselling author Kavitha Kane draws out the voice of a character that lacked one- even before she was turned to stone. Tracing her journey from a precocious child, to a studious and sheltered princess, to the loving wife of Rishi Gautham, *Ahalya's Awakening* delves into the mind of a woman who yearns to control her own destiny. In her tale lies the story of every woman, even today.

Kane's style of writing is really appreciable for the text. The way she stuck to the mythological tale is remarkable which also includes her own thoughts into the story line. She has written in such a way that, it is even relevant in today's society that the readers can connect with. Moreover Ahalya is a strong character who is independent and wants to gain more knowledge and is a good role model too. Unfortunately her only weakness is that she loses focus and falls in love, thus changing her path to becoming a wife and a mother, which does not end up well in her case. Indra also makes for a very interesting villain, where we can see the obsession and lust he has for her and will not give up going after her. In Kane's beautifully created fictional world, which is a mirror of the real one, where intolerance, hatred and spite prevail, happiness and peace are; but dreams for anybody irrespective of gender or circumstance. By preserving the proper spirits of the past, contained not just in Indian mythology, but in those belonging to different parts of the world, passed on by storytellers, wandering minstrels, bards and yes, present day writers on the subject, we can

find a way to deal with the horrors of the present in order to usher in a better future where sense prevails.

When in the times where divine men and women have come on earth, enjoyed its breezy expanse, helped in warfare, keeping up 'dharma' and maintaining the world balance, there was no scarcity for the love that swept the heart of many who have eventually become the consorts and ruled different realms and then there was born Ahalya into royalty bestowed with life like everyone else, yet was different. Ahalya is an ethereal beauty in the pursuit of things that are bound to be beyond the reach of the woman. Are woman just an object of love interest, who gets married, bear progeny and constrict themselves into the world called household? Are our epics the forerunners of this patriarchy? Ahalya was also portrayed constantly as a symbol of wild sexual desires which made her allow Lord Indra to cross boundaries. Was Ahalya only that, a human with carnal desires?

Kavitha Kane breaks the stereotypes of Ahalya and of any woman. The questions that surround the archetypes of woman, the construct of patriarchy and the challenging need of desire are addressed by Kane. Once and for all, as she spells an accepting version of Ahalya, a woman, who wanted to learn rather than get married and was not just a rock but a woman with will so strong yet had her own flaws like any other person on earth. *Ahalya's Awakening*, shows how the breaking of the cocoon to fly free as a butterfly for a human involves years of toil and turmoil only to end up finding that the real truth is within YOU. Kane says our epics are such a rich source material for reinterpretation, and *Ahalya's Awakening* is one such offering. The very fact that there are so many versions of the original story means that, it has been interpreted and reinterpreted down the ages. Valmiki's Ahalya is a woman who knows what she wants and desires revealing the entire gamut of emotions and experience but that same Ahalya becomes voiceless victim bracketed either as the devoted

wife or the adulteress, painted white or black. Her status and subordination has swung in extremes through social times, through changed perspectives.

Ahalya, the 14-minutes short film directed by Sujoy Ghosh is also the reinterpretation of the same legendry episode from Indian epic mentioned in chapter 2. Set in contemporary Kolkata, *Ahalya* is an epic thriller where the fate of an apsara, a maharishi and god of rain; Indra is sealed by a curse. Desire, seduction and infidelity form a web of intrigue to enthrall the audience. In Hindu mythology, Ahalya is the wife of Gautham Maharishi. As legend goes, Ahalya cheated on her much older husband with Indra following which she was cursed by Gautham. The plot remains somewhat same in Ghosh's version, but there is a twist towards the end and the film is likely to keep us glued to our screens. According to the original tale, the moral says that adulteresses deserve no sympathy and since they have hearts of stone, will be turned into stone themselves. Only divine intervention can be their salvation. The short film *Ahalya* is almost like a testament to marriage and a warning to people who try to trespass where they shouldn't or don't know how to say no to temptation. In this short film only the guilty, in this case, Indra is the one who is punished and Ahalya is shown as someone who reveals to the masses about the innocence of the mythological Ahalya by co-conspiring with her older husband. The short film is a corrected allegory to the mythological tale.

Sujoy Ghosh's *Ahalya* is the revenge and justice of modern Ahalya. The moral drawn can be: To control your fascination and urge to try something out of the unknown, women play an important part in this world's creation and Sex often lands you in trouble. (If it's not with your partner). *Ahalya* is a different film not only in terms of form and content but also in terms of revolutionizing the very way in which films are viewed in our country. The film has been released in social media and it has gained widespread recognition.

Again when we come to the short story *Silaroopini (The Stone Woman)*, Sreedevi carries and diverts the same mythical story to an unexpected climax, where Ahalya chooses to be in the form of stone, when she learns about the abandonment of Sita, realizing even Ram cannot transcend the anger of a jealous husband.

In the novel *Ahalya's Awakening*, the characters portrayed are highly intensive, attention and catchy in nature especially the villain Indra in it. It has also succeeded in introducing many more characters like Menaka, through whom the story is narrated, King Mudgal and queen Nalayani, the parents of Ahalya and her twin brother Divodas who is as intelligent and kind as Ahalya. This has helped increase the depth and intensity of the novel and expand reader's anxiety and rationality. Every characters has got their own importance in the text. The text ends with Ahalya's "awakening" itself. She says "I found myself confronted with truth and fidelity- it upholds as precious to us as we are affected by it. I had to know and understand the value of my existence in this world. For that, I had to be alone, and made this curse a blessing. I didn't need anyone, neither to love nor protect not to save or salvage me. I was the seeker of my own salvation. For the first time lived the life given to me as a woman with all honesty, true to my instincts and faithful to my impulses, eager and yearning, but always true to *myself*. Always." (349).

When the text culminates in Ahalya's rebirth where she claims her past and identity, the short film is the overarching force that drives a modern day take on the myth of Ahalya in which power structures have been reversed. The Ahalya of 2015 avenges the wrong done to her mythological alter-ego by imprisoning (killing) every 'Indra' who comes to her, seduces him and in a manner of speaking, 'uses' her (impotent) husband to ensnare the 'Indras' and then, literally turn them into beautiful dolls with the help of Gautham to decorate her drawing room with. What a revenge and created by a male director at that! Ghosh has used very low key music as the background score but has interwoven a few lines of a telling Tagore song-

“esho esho amaar ghare esho” (will you step into my chamber) in the beginning of the film. The use of the black screen towards the end of the film could be confusing until one hears the screaming voice of Indra that tells you that he is shouting from inside the dark world of the stone he has been captured with. The very brief time span of the story keeps the suspense alive. The film has bits of magic, surrealism, and various emotions in one story- greed, love, morality, all these came in one place. Whereas the short story *Silaroopini* ends in complete protest by Ahalya. Therefore the same myth is interpreted and retold and explored in three different manners; *Ahalya's Awakening* (Kavitha Kane), *Ahalya* (short film, Sujoy Ghosh) and *Silaroopini* (short story, K B Sreedevi) which points out three entities; redemption, revenge and protest respectively.

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