

Reimagining the Myth of Ahalya: A Feminist Reading of Nandini Sahu's Poem Ahalya's Waiting

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ABSTRACT

In the last two decades of the new millennium, as far as Indian Writing in English is concerned, the focus has shifted from the mainstream characters to the marginal figures of the Indian epics which is evinced by a renewed interest in Indian mythology through numerous retellings in the recent past. These retellings are unique in the sense that the focus is mainly on women and marginalized characters thereby offering fresh perspectives of interrogation and interpretation and also foregrounding new sensibilities in the process. Hence, in the recent times, more specifically from a women-centric perspective, appropriations and reworkings of the central women characters from two prominent Indian epics, that is, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, can be observed in the form of folk songs by rural women as well as by women writers attempting to dissect the traditional narratives from a feminist perspective.

In the quest of understanding the experiences and values that shape the collective consciousness of a given society, epics serve as an important tool of exploration as they continue to hold influence over the masses even today. Additionally, epics continue to form an important part of the cultural domain, and hence, all such appropriations serve a very specific purpose among many vis-à-vis tapping into the potential of traditional narratives to act as a resource in so far as understanding and interrogating gender politics and dominant ideologies and at the same time offering subsequent corrective measures is concerned.

'Ahalya's Waiting', a poem by Professor Nandini Sahu, then, seeks to embark upon two important projects, that is to unravel and interrogate the gender politics and offer alternative sites of resistance against the dominant ideologies that continue to impinge upon the aspirations of women even today. The poem features in her anthology of poems titled *A Song, Half and Half* (2022). Moreover, the poem portrays not only the unjust treatment Ahalya is subjected to after she has been deceitfully seduced and raped by Indra and her subsequent metamorphosis into a stone owing to the curse by her husband sage Gautama but also concerns itself with her assertion of self and claiming subjectivity as its central theme.

Keywords: *Feminism, Myth, Gender Politics, Resistance, Folk*

About the Poetess

Professor Nandini Sahu is the Former Director, School of Foreign Languages and is currently a Professor of English at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi. She is a renowned poet, creative writer and folklorist and holds a significant place in the contemporary Indian English Writing literary scene. Professor Sahu has been a recipient of numerous prestigious awards and has authored and edited seventeen books till date.

Retellings of Indian Epics

In the post-millennium era, there has been a paradigm shift in Indian Writing in English, in so far as a renewed interest in Indian mythology through retellings is concerned, where the focus is mainly on women and marginalized characters, particularly with the advent of writers like Devdutt Pattanaik, Amish Tripathi, Kavita Kane and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni on the literary scene. Hence, in the recent times, more specifically from a women-centric perspective, appropriations and reworkings of the central women characters from two prominent Indian epics, that is, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, can be observed in the form of folk songs by rural women as well as by women writers attempting to dissect the traditional narratives from a feminist perspective. Chitra Banerjee's views while stating her aim in the "Author's Note" of her famous work *The Palace of Illusions* are insightful with regard to her choice of narrating the tale of Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective:

“Listening to the stories of Mahabharat as a young girl.... I was left unsatisfied with the portrayals of the women.... (who) in some ways remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers and sons.

If I ever wrote a book, I remember thinking, I would place women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits.” (Banerjee xiv-xv).

To put things in perspective, we also need to understand as to why epics continue to hold influence over the masses even today. Simply put, epics continue to form an important part of the cultural domain, and hence, all such appropriations serve a very specific purpose among many vis-à-vis tapping into the potential of traditional narratives to act as a resource in so far as understanding and interrogating gender politics and dominant ideologies and offering subsequent corrective measures and resistant ideologies is concerned. While commenting on the familiarity that Indians have with the two Hindu epics and the status of these epics in India, A.K. Ramanujan in his essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" states, “In India and in Southeast Asia, no one ever reads the Ramayana or the Mahabharata for the first time” (Ramanujan 158). Moreover, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the two Hindu epics, continue to remain relevant and exercise great influence with regard to the everyday affairs of ordinary folk of Indian origin both within and outside India, more so, in the case of Hindu communities and therefore it is this very centrality in the context of Indian cultural domain that makes them a key site of contestation for dealing with numerous competing and contradictory ideologies. The characters from these epics are also

often evoked to drive home an important lesson about life and the myriad ways in which it functions. The continuing resonance of these epics in Indian socio-cultural context is also underscored by the unprecedented popularity that their televised versions have enjoyed beginning from 1980s onwards.

Ahalya's Waiting

'Ahalya's Waiting' is a poem by Professor Nandini Sahu in seven stanzas which features in her anthology of poems titled *A Song, Half and Half* (2022). The collection concerns itself with human emotions of all hues and colours, be it love and loss or suffering and redemption. The poem deals with not only the plight and predicament of Ahalya after she has been deceitfully seduced and raped by Indra and her subsequent metamorphosis into a stone owing to the curse by her husband, sage Gautama but also concerns itself with her assertion of self as its central theme. Ahalya is considered as one of the Panchkanyas, the five sacred virgins, that is, Ahalya, Kunti, Draupadi, Tara and Mandodari. Interestingly, it is Ahalya's name that is invoked first while invoking the name of the Panchakanyas. Ahalya literally means uncultivable but metaphorically her name suggests that she is the epitome of the untameable female spirit. While commenting on regarding Ahalya as one of the Panchkanyas and the significance she holds on the collective consciousness of Indian women, Satya Chaitanya's views in his essay "Female Subversion: The Spirit of Lilith in Indian Culture" are instructive as he suggests:

"It is perhaps this paying obeisance to the spirit of independence in women that finds expression is the exhortation to women to remember daily the panchakanyas-Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari, the five sacred virgins none of whom was a virgin in the traditional sense-the remembrance of whom, it is said, will liberate one from great sins." (Satya Chaitanya 188)

Similarly, it is this very idea of establishing Ahalya as a fiercely independent and defiant figure that the poem looks to explore and capture. The poem begins with the pronouncement of the curse by sage Gautama who admonishes Ahalya to remain "invisible to all creatures" and tells her that she can only be rescued by Rama who will emancipate her from "greed and delusion" and sanctify her in the process through his touch and thereby allowing Ahalya to assume the human form again. The poem then recounts the sexual violation of Ahalya by Indra who enamoured of her beauty disguised himself as her husband, sage Gautama and satiated his carnal desires. Though, Ahalya was a devout wife but owing to her deceitful seduction by Indra, she was turned to stone after being cursed by her husband, sage Gautama.

The poetess through the poem underscores the fact that such a harsh indictment and denunciation of Ahalya at the hands of her husband reeks of patriarchal hypocrisy and biasedness as a woman is blamed and unjustly punished for her own sexual violation. Instead of penalizing the perpetrator and compelling him to make amends for his crime, the woman is cursed and is forced to remain in a lifeless state bereft of all regenerative activities for eternity and her redemption then would only be made possible with the arrival of a morally upright man, that is Rama, the epitome of righteous conduct, and through the touch of his feet, he supposedly will emancipate Ahalya and restore her to her original human form. Hence, such an act lends itself to conceding the active agency to a man, notwithstanding his virtuosity, and who for all practical purposes will then be considered the superior one according to the patriarchal social system rather than the woman who has been wronged. Ahalya's fate then oscillates from being the prerogative of one man to the other.

Interestingly, in the Ahalya episode that features in "Balakanda" of the Ramayana, it is mentioned that Brahma created Ahalya as a woman of unsurpassed beauty. Indra, the Lord of the Heaven, is enamoured of Ahalya's beauty and desires her fervently even though her marriage with sage Gautama was ordained by Brahma. Indra unable to restrain himself one day finds an opportune occasion when sage Gautama had gone out for his daily ablutions. In his absence, Indra assumes his form and propositions Ahalya by telling her, "Well-made woman, with a beautiful waist, men who want it do not wait for a woman's fertile period. I want to make love with you" (Ramayana 1.47.15-31).

Although, Ahalya could see through the deception but out of curiosity about the king of the heaven, could not dissuade Indra's advances. She then insists Indra to leave before sage Gautama arrives and tells him that he has got what he desired and now he must go away quickly. Indra too feared sage Gautama for his ascetic powers but as he hastened in a confused state and saw sage Gautama entering and it seemed to Indra that he was blazing with fire. Naturally, Indra is petrified at his sight and when the sage saw his wickedness as he had disguised himself as the sage himself, Indra is admonished and cursed by the sage in no uncertain terms as Gautama tells him, "You fool, since you have taken my form and done what should not be done, you shall be without your fruit" (Ramayana 1.47.15-31).

Subsequently, he turns to Ahalya, his wife and curses her as well:

“You will live here for many thousands of years, eating wind, without any food, lying on ashes and generating inner heat. Invisible to all creatures, you will live in this hermitage. And when Rama, who is unassailable, comes to this terrible forest, then you will be purified. By receiving him as a guest you will become free of greed and delusion, you evil woman, and you will take on your own form in my presence, full of joy.” (Ramayana 1.47.15-31)

Later, Lord Shiva comes to Indra’s rescue after Indra had offered penitence through severe penances and austerities and Ahalya is restored back to her human form when Rama touches Ahalya, who had turned to stone, with his feet while passing through Gautama’s hermitage, on his way to Mithila accompanied by Lakshmana and their preceptor Vishwamitra. What is most noticeable in the incident narrated in the epic is the fact that Ahalya does not have a voice because she fails to register any form of protest against her denunciation and accepts the curse passively. Hence, the poem ‘Ahalya’s Waiting’ clearly brings forth the idea that Ahalya’s redemption through Rama’s touch does not justify her wrongful victimization by either Indra or her husband sage Gautama, whatsoever may have been the context.

The Second stanza of the poem therefore begins with first person account of Ahalya who questions her unjust treatment at the hands of her husband and Indra, her violator as she interrogates:

“Am I really waiting since centuries

for my salvation by just a touch, and for my redemption?” (Nandini Sahu 26)

Ahalya then tries to reclaim her subjectivity by asserting that she is a woman who is conscious of her bodily needs and the functionality of all the five senses that are part of her being. But more importantly, Ahalya has all these senses under her control rather than being dictated by them. The poetess by juxtaposing the consciousness of the senses with the restraint that Ahalya can exercise, brings out the contrast that exists between Ahalya and Indra. Though, both are aware of the functionality of the five senses but Ahalya does not submit to them whereas Indra does and thereby establishing Ahalya’s superiority in the moral and ethical realm, too. The poetess therefore clearly repudiates Indra for yielding to his carnal desires. Ahalya, on the other hand, claims to have attained an equanimous mind and she refuses to be invisibilized by the patriarchal forces that she must contend with. Professor Nandini Sahu, the poetess, seems to suggest that being in a detached meditative mode for so long, Ahalya, has come to acquire a timeless condition as she asserts, “I am time and timeworn” (Nandini Sahu 26).

Ahalya in this retelling, unlike her mythological counterpart also refuses to be redeemed through Rama's touch as she rather than passively accepting her fate refuses to bow down to it. The poetess maintains it throughout the poem that Ahalya has been wrongly implicated and punished for a crime that she had not committed. Ahalya, accordingly, defends her ground and proclaims that her "penance is not yet completed" and she is not to be indicted for it as she is "untainted, confident and clean" (Nandini Sahu 27).

Subsequently, in the fourth stanza, Ahalya not only becomes a representative voice of all those voiceless women who suffer silently in a society upholding patriarchal norms but also assumes a transcendental quality and becomes the elemental woman, the quintessential ultimate form of woman, which is beyond the trappings of the ordinary world and the gendered prejudices that it entails and dares Rama to become the elemental man himself in order to touch her. The poetess then seems to imply that Rama must abandon all notions of superiority and patronizing attitude and regard Ahalya as his equal to let redemption come to fruition.

Rama, adds the poetess in the fifth stanza, must not touch Ahalya either out of compulsion like her husband, sage Gautama or lustfully as did Indra but as a fellow human being whose heart ought to be brimming with compassion and empathy enabling him to dispel her fears and misgivings as Ahalya exhorts Rama to make her his muse thereby subverting the gendered positions generally accorded to them. As it is only this awareness on Rama's part that the same life-forces that function in him also dwell in Ahalya's being that can "redeem the stone" and only then the curse of sage Gautama will be undone and can pave the path for Ahalya's emancipation (Nandini Sahu 27). Therefore, Ahalya's demand, in the sixth stanza, is not for a mere redemption but for the creation of an egalitarian space where she is accorded human dignity, respect, and equal treatment and where there is no scope for any form of marginalization owing to her gender.

In addition to it, she demands an answer from society and from Rama himself, since he being an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, is considered omniscient with regard to her "quintuple patriarchal relegation" and her concomitant suffering and humiliation (Nandini Sahu 28). The poetess then draws our attention to the unjust treatment that Ahalya had been subjected to from various men, beginning with her father who gifted her away to her husband, sage Gautama, without seeking her consent. Sage Gautama then curses her after he learns that she has been deceitfully seduced by Indra disguised as the sage himself. Owing to her experiences then,

Ahalya refuses to be touched by another man until he is purged of all patriarchal and worldly trappings. The poetess also suggests that ‘touch’ has been used metaphorically in the poem as it is aimed at complementing and completing each other rather than to be used as an instrument of establishing one’s superiority over the other. The poetess then tells us that Ahalya is beyond the narrow confines of purity-pollution norms and hence she reclaims her space and identity and refuses to be labelled by societal norms as she asserts that she is her own possessor and unabashedly takes ownership of her actions. Ultimately, Ahalya embodies assertion and wants to lead life on her own terms rather than waiting and suffering passively as therein lies her true liberation and emancipation.

Conclusion

Consequently, the poetess seems indignant at the portrayal of women, especially Ahalya in the Ramayana which is why she chooses to write as she firmly believes that Ahalya has been misrepresented and wishes to amend and offer an alternative viewpoint by revising the tale. The poem focuses entirely on what goes on in Ahalya’s mind as we see the narrative unfold from her vantage point. The resultant change in perspective owing to according centrality to Ahalya’s character lends itself to creation of an effect that is entirely new. The portrayal of Rama in the poem is also in complete contrast to the mainstream version of the epic which insists on deifying Rama. Instead, the poetess throughout the poem exhorts Rama to accord equal space and significance to Ahalya by acknowledging and accepting the unjust suffering and cruelty inflicted on her by the patriarchal society in general, and by her husband in particular. The poem places the blame squarely on Indra and sage Gautama, and by extension the societal norms, where one acts out of lustful desire and the latter is driven by jealousy as sage Gautama curses Ahalya and inflicts suffering on her, notwithstanding the fact that the sin was not committed by her, as she did not consent for it and was instead seduced and raped by Indra who gratifies his carnal desires by impersonating and assuming the bodily form of her husband.

To sum up, the commonplace assumptions pertaining to womanhood, morality, infidelity, and purity and pollution norms have all been problematized in the poem, which deals with the mythical tale of Ahalya and turns the traditional narrative of deceitful seduction on its head and rather makes it an act of defiance on the part of Ahalya. Thus, in the poem we find that through the revision of a traditional narrative, selfhood is legitimized, and it imbues the cultural tropes

with new meanings, thereby making it possible to break away from tradition, culminating in the creation of a speaking subject who not only repudiates the patriarchal order but also propels on the path of self-discovery and empowerment. The poem then captures the dynamic tradition of Indian epics by reworking the mythical tale of Ahalya from a women-centric perspective and addresses various issues pertaining to gender discrimination that have been neglected in the classical tradition. There is also a deliberate attempt on the part of the poetess to contemporize the narrative in order to voice multiple issues concerning women at large in the Indian context. The poetess, therefore, has used Ahalya's character as a vehicle to voice the sentiments of women who have been subjected to a marginalized position in a predominantly patriarchal society owing to their gendered identities. The poem thus succeeds in capturing the women's shared sense of suffering, and it comes through most intensely through the reworking of Ahalya's tale. The poetess, therefore succeeds in challenging the dominant versions of the tale by retelling it from a woman's point of view.

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