

Desire as a Contemporary Predicament: A Study of Pratibha Ray's *Ahalya* A woman's Eternal Quest for love

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Abstract

Mythology and myths have always been an essential part of cultures and legacies around the globe. The most beautiful aspect about myths is that it remains applicable and relevant even thousands of years after inception. Triumphant characters like Ahalya who do not revel in their misery and plod towards liberation continue to cast their spell even in the contemporary times. Hence the re-reading, re-thinking and re-writing of the myths. In their novel form, myths only represent the world in which they previously existed but also the contemporary scenario. The present paper aims to study renowned and leading Odia writer Pratibha Ray's *Ahalya A woman's Eternal Quest for Love* from the desire perspective in the contemporary times. The paper examines the desires of not only Ahalya but also Indra and Maharishi Gautama. The above-mentioned deliberation lays bare Ahalya's predicament in a different light. It also helps us top understand the different layers of Indra-Ahalya affair from Maharishi Gautama and Indra's perspective.

Keywords: Desire, Liberation, Predicament, Beauty, restraint

Mythology and myth has been an inseparable part of the cultures and heritages of many countries around globe. Devdutt Patnaik puts myth in his *Myth=Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology* (2006) as Myth is essentially a cultural common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. This understanding may be religious or secular. (20)

The most beautiful aspect about myths is that it remains applicable and relevant even thousands of years after inception. Triumphant characters like Ahalya who do not revel in their misery and plod towards liberation continue to cast their spell even in the contemporary times. Hence the re-reading, re-thinking and re-writing of the myths. In their novel form, myths only represent the world in which they previously existed but also the contemporary scenario. Among all, Indian

mythology is replete with various mythological accounts. Myth emboss the archetypes on the minds of society and then metamorphose into culture, tradition and customs over the time. The postmodern era of questioning and making informed choices has made it possible for writers to re-read the myths in present context and make them relevant for the society. Joseph Strelka in his paper *Mythe/Myth* says, “many literary works serve as an excellent examples of the revitalization of myth. No less worthy of note, it is often myth that gives power to some of the greatest works of literature” (Strelka, *Myth/Myth*) Pratibha Ray fragments the ancient metanarrative of Ahalya and looks at it from various perspectives. The novel *Ahalya A woman's Eternal Quest for Love* is a translation of the Pratibha Ray's Odia novel *Mahamoha*. Babru Bahan Samal is the translator of this novel. The present paper studies desire as a predicament for the modern man in Pratibha Ray's novel *Ahalya A woman's Eternal Quest For Love*. Pratibha Ray is an odia professor and writer. Her work with the Bonda tribe of Odisha is well known. She is renowned for her boldness. At present, she is an active researcher and a committed academician. The list of her awards is uncountable but the most important being Jnanpith, Padamshree, Moorti Devi award. She also clinched the Sahitya Academy award for her story collection “Ullanghan” in 2000. Pratibha Ray's *Ahalya* at the outset deliberates on touch, desire, sin and liberation, patriarchy, beauty, male domination etc. In this novel, she ponders on the patriarchal tendency present in our society since Vedic ages. Above all, she deliberates and postulates on how to control one's physical and mental desires. She does not only reflect on Ahalya's desire but also Indra and Gautama's desire. All the three major character of this episode bring about their downfall due to one or the other desire either physical, material or spiritual. The novel studied for the present paper is the translated version from the original Odia Novel *MahaMoha*. The title of the novel itself evinces that the author illustrates the mythical Indra-Ahalya affair from the desire perspective of the major characters in the novel. Ahalya stands for physical desire, Gautma for spiritual and indra for physical as well as material.

The end of colonialism and rise of neocolonism and globalization accentuates a consumerist tendency in the world today. Easy manufacture and rapid accessibility of luxurious goods play a major role in fostering this tendency. The tendency to receive everything in superlative degrees sometimes interferes with the basic value system of humanity. The erosion of human values leads to the loss of the power of discrimination and further gives rise to unwanted harmful desires.

According to the myth, Ahalya is the daughter of Brahma created by him. He makes her replete with intense beauty and values. One beautiful aspect of her nature is her compassionate disposition towards Mother Nature and the non-Aryan people who are looked down upon by the Aryans. She leads a life of a normal Vedic girl in the context of her education and her teenage days. Two things that spell doom in her life are her beauty and everybody's blessings that

she is worthy of only Indra. Her beauty edges her towards pride and her knowledge as worthy for Indra makes her edge towards bodily attachment. Her friends, Devas, and Danvas all appreciate her beauty. She spends most of the time in front of the mirror and only Brahma dissuades her from doing this. He does not want the most beautiful girl of the universe to fall in the trap of her own beauty. The concept of beauty obstructs her realization of the Divine. She confesses that, “the more he advised me to ignore my body, the more I got attached to it. (Ray 9). Lord Brahma tries to warn her about vulnerabilities of her bodily beauty and attachment to it and the supposed downfall in advance and tells her:

The body of a person is not everything. It can decay in the blink of an eye. The beauty is untrue. The pleasure of the body is temporary. The life will be worthwhile if you pay attention to the soul instead of the body. The soul does not perish. (Ray 9)

Even at a very young age as this, Lord Brahma tries to move her to see the beauty of a person’s soul but Ahalya confesses she could decipher only that she is not supposed to look into the mirror. The deep message that Brahma tries to foster does not seep in.

In contrast to the above, Lord Brahma himself holds a discussion regarding her beauty in the heaven with all the Gods including Indra present there. This discussion is also parallel to the contemporary situation where parents continuously take pride in the beauty of their daughters and instill arrogance regarding their beauty in them. Ahalya’s love for her bodily beauty instigates similar arrogance in her persona and intense reluctance on the question of marrying Gautama. She desires for a man who can be her counterpart in beauty as well. Gautama is twenty years her senior and she does not find him attractive at all. She says she wants to tell her father that, “I have no feelings for him. His body never excited me. I am doubtful that it will do so in the future. Hence I don’t want to marry him.(Ray 107) This predicament is parallel to that of a modern woman. Young women today aspire only for bodily pleasure and beauty. They disregard learning and knowledge and aspire for shallow standards of beauty.

While the quagmire of the body and desire clutches Ahalya she is a dutiful wife to Gautama. Gautama’s indifference towards her unrivalled beauty confuses her. As Pratibha Ray, explains that “Ahalya is the symbol for the Saundrya bhava.”(3) The only thing that remains on her mind is the loving consummation of the marriage by Gautama. On the other hand, Gautama’s meditation ritual, every night to make Ahalya stand naked in front of him to subdue his sensual desire fuels Ahalya’s desire. Ahalya understands that Gautama requires her body not to make love but to develop his resistance power. She confesses that ,” I was burning with an intense desire the whole night and Gautama was deep in his Yoga sadhana. He was invoking the yajana like a priest while I was the firewood. (Ray 131)

Ahalya's intense pride in beauty leading to arrogance and ego culminates in a strong desire for bodily passion. Gautama longs to elevate to the level of Brahma Rishi therefore the indifference towards Ahalya. A clash ensues in their married life as Gautama wants her to transcend her bodily desires but Ahalya wants to experience love. There is a friction between Ahalya and Gautama's desire. On keen observation, we see Gautama cannot receive exoneration because even he is not free from desires. As mentioned before he wants to become Devrishi and then Brahma Rishi. Gautama's spiritual desire in juxtaposition with Ahalya's physical desire does not amalgamate into something higher. Whether physical or spiritual, Gautama harbors a desire for elevation. A Rishi of his stature is also not bereft of desire. His Goal is not liberation but to attain a status. Narda's wisdom in this context to Gautama on keeping Ahalya locked stands very appropriate. He says, "if she gets lost, it is not due to her own will, but due to your apathy. Please be little more caring towards her. Look at Vishnu, Shiva, Indra. They are devoted to their Sadhana. Still they are in complete union with their wives. Is love obstacle to moksha? On one hand, you wanted to get married to become a man of society. At the same time, you want to be a Devrishi by your strenuous sadhana. (Ray 210) This situation stands true even in the contemporary world. Men and women fall either for status or for physical desire. There is an Ahalya in every woman or Gautama and Indra in every man. This is surely the predicament of the modern day. Every indifferent Gautama creates a dissatisfied Ahalya and thus created every Ahalya finds her solace in an enticing Indra. His covetousness for ravishing Ahalya's beauty is severely adamant. He forgets his position in the heaven, gives into his desire, and invites Maharishi Gautama's curse and centuries of shame on himself and Ahalya. In order to fulfil his shallow desires the modern man stoops down from the elevated status and squirms like a worm in the mire of desires. The myth of Ahalya is complete in all dimension only when it includes the stance of Gautama and Indra as well. Whether spiritual, physical or material, a desire is a desire after all. The highest state is a human bereft of any desire. Therefore, none of them can be absolved and all three of them are equally responsible for each other's downfall.

In the predicament-afflicted world of desire then, there is a diminutive possibility to go forward with liberation and soul searching. In lieu of which the humanity stays stranded in transgression and can never transport into transcendence. This transgression swamp mutates the world into what Eliot terms as the wasteland. Ahalya's transgression and Gautama's obsession transform the Asharam and the surrounding area into wasteland and the predicament goes on even today. Eliot's three D's stand as a resolution to the predicament. The three D's enshrined in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Brahmana chapter V, and used by Eliot in his poem Wasteland stand as true and applicable even after almost a century. The three D in the fifth section of the poem 'What the Thunder said' stand for Datta. Dayavadham. Damyata. (433) It asks the humans to practice charity, Danavas to practice compassion and devas to practice self-restraint from a life of pleasure. To

annihilate the predicament and head towards attaining a life full of liberation the modern man has to practice self-restraint, charity and compassion and save one's life and the world from transmuting into a wasteland. Only then, there will be a peace that passes all understanding. Shantih! Shantih! Shantih!(Eliot, 434)

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