



Negotiating Women's Desire: Desire, Autonomy and Destiny of Ahalyain Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri's "Ahalyamoksham: Uyirthezhunnetta Sthree"

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ABSTRACT

An overarching urge to manifest the needs of mind, body and spirit, desire has been an invariable category of human existence. The disciplinary standards proposed by the society delimited the expressions of human desire and tamed human entities to repress and adapt as per the requisites of context. Both in the formal and conceptual formulations of desire across Indian society, desire has been conceived as a forbidden territory for women, while it operates as a legitimate token of masculinity in the dominant social discourses. The current paper examines the intricacies of the execution of desire and the consequences in the light of "Ahalyamoksham: Uyirthezhunnetta Sthree" by the Malayalam poet Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri analyzing it using paradigms of micropolitics of desire. The objectives of the study include analyzing the evolution of the parameters setting a conventional value system which conceives and propagates the notion that desire is a psychotic excess from which women have to abstain, as well as the writer's intention to transgress the boundaries created by the social paradigms.

Keywords: Women, desire, destiny, body

Desire is conceived across the world as a dangerous excess, reflecting irrationality of human species which must be disciplined for the welfare of humanity. Dismantling this common (mis)conception, Deleuze theorizes desire as a dynamic reality, a force which is productive. Keeping the subject and object of desire apart, the emphasis that Deleuze made is on the practice of desire affirming the correlation between desire per se and the innumerable discourses in which desire manifests as essence. In *Ani-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), depicting the subtle undercurrents of the production of desire and the implications of which in socio-politico-economic fronts, Deleuze and Guattari stated that "there are no desiring-machines that exist outside the social machines that they form on a large scale; and no social machines without the desiring machines that inhabit them on a small scale." (340). This observation postulates two assumptions: desire is so naturally embedded in the social system and desire is no neutral entity which simply occupy the social machine, rather it serves as a force instrumental in the creation of social machines. Desire to own and the desire to exercise one's agency are two vital necessities of human beings that sometimes undergo social censoring.

The paraphernalia of the functioning of any system is discipline and homogeneity. In order to establish and maintain a society in a disciplined fashion, a set of rules were created and circulated in various ethnic communities. Mythical narratives play a pivotal role in the stabilisation of cultural codes and *The Ramayana* is no exception. Many a feminist scholars such as Helen Cixous expressed their worries about the way how women are trapped in their bodies; while sometimes language prevent the expression, sometimes norms induce hurdles. Ahalya is a significant character who is emblematic of the binary construction of women either as extremely liberated or as extremely subjugated. Ahalya, in *The Ramayana*, was the charming wife of the old sage Gauthama, who according to Valmiki was subjected to the curse of her husband for having an illegitimate relationship with Indra. Many a Ramayana versions, though affirmed the curse story, rephrased the episode as Ahalya's failure to recognize Indra who approached her disguised in the pretext that he was Gauthama. Obviously, as per Bhakti oriented Ramayanas, Ahalya was an 'innocent sinner' who did not exercise her desire, but was subjected to the punishment of becoming solidified as a stone due to her weakness in finding out the true self of Indra under the disguise of Gauthama. This erasure of desire is what Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri interrogated in his poem titled "Ahalyamoksham: Uyirthezhunnetta Sthree."

The poem establishes a counter narrative of woman's subjectivity and consciousness. Among the plethora of social norms was hidden the desire of women; rather, a good woman is to repress her desire in favour of the respectability of the community, family and husband. Submission to the patriarchal norms is considered as mandatory for the so called pious and loyal women whom Ahalya represented. So, in order to maintain the good woman status, she was destined to observe self-sacrifice and must be satisfied with what is provided, either it is the partner or the physical comforts. Ultimately, the woman's disposal of exercise of her agency and desire is an offence, as it shatters her devotional good woman image and threatens the system and the society. This is the reason for the sublimated acts of the Bhakti texts



instrumental in producing social codes and ethical perspectives that manipulate Ahalya's desire as her error due to weakness.

In "Can the Subaltern Speak" GayatriChakravortySpivak during the discussions on female self immolation- Sati- observes that both myths and purana demand a , Sati, "good wife" out of all women (101). The puranic construction of Panchakanyas, comprising of Ahalya, Draupathi, sita, Tara and Mandodari was based on this loyalty factor towards the husband(s). Many of the ancient narratives simply relegate women to be mere bodies, the custodian and owner of which is none other than husband. Ahalya of Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri is the woman who speaks, resists and confronts this reality and voices her agency in the exercise of her body. In the poem Ahalya confront Rama whose praiseworthy act of giving Salvation to her by releasing her from the status of a stone. The agitated Ahalya of the poem is a contrast to the muted Ahalya , who was thankful as portrayed in the myths. Realizing the intention of taming her body, and forcing Brahmacharya on her by the patriarchal authority that Goutama represents, Ahalya of the poem remarks that she would rather remain as a stone than return to the status of the wife of Gautama. She went to the extent of choosing Indra over Gautama, prioritizing her desire, which is long denied, thus discrediting the social text of repression. So the text rejected both the versions of Kampan who portrays Ahalya as not giving consent though not in a state to resist:

and she knew.

Yet unable

To put aside what was not hers,

She dallied in her joy, (quoted in *Many Ramayanas*; Richman 29)

The text partly follows Valmiki's reading that Ahalya's act was a conscious act which was tagged as adultery. In the Balakanda of Valmiki Ramayana in Canto XLVIIIValmiki stated:

On a day
It chanced the saint had gone away,
When Town-destroying Indra came,
And saw the beauty of the dame.
The sage's form the God endued,
And thus the fair Ahalyá wooed:
"Love, sweet! should brook no dull delay
But snatch the moments when he may."
She knew him in the saint's disguise,
Lord Indra of the Thousand Eyes,
But touched by love's unholy fire,
She yielded to the God's desire.(Valmiki 220)

Namboothiri's version forwards further by stating that Ahalya was not conceiving the act with either shame or guilt. Instead she assert that her choice was right and she yearns to take it to the further levels. To the question, why Rama was portrayed as the passive listener to the dramatic monologue of Ahalya, the answer can be identified by looking at him , neither as a man or God, but as a metaphor representing the patriarchal institution that believed in female existence at the mercy of man. Thus one can read AhalyaMoksham as a n extension of the counter narrative discourse initiated by Kumaranasan in " ChinthavishtayayaSita", the text that voices Sita's comments and reactions.

Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri giving voice to Ahalya subverted the sociological consciousness that desire of woman is illegitimate. By establishing the female voice and thereby the female agency, the writer display the emerging consciousness of gender and body among the underprivileged women subjected to repressive operations of mutilation and confinement. The encounter of the writers on desire is a political project proposing an alternate ideology which threatened the rules of the institution, marriage arguing for individual liberty and autonomy. Though representing Ahalya, he shared the ideas of assertiveness, claiming the body, demanding respect, celebrating womanhood and denying the norms of patriarchy. The cultural context of Kerala and the invisibility of Brahmin women in Kerela might be the underlying force behind the making of the poem. LalithambikaAntarjanam's "PrathikaraDevatha" and V.T. Bhatathirippadu's "AdukkalayilNinnuArangathekkku" have explored the possibility of driving marginalised Brahmin women out of the domestic confinement and degradation. To Ahalya of Vishnu Narayanan Namboothirialso ,desire is a reality, which is a rational and an affirmative vital force as Deleuze remarkably conceived. So the writer was trying to substantiate through the work that desire is neither a psychic force, nor an ideology though it functions in those fashions too.To Ahalya, desire is not a lack. Instead to her it is a part of doing justice to oneself. N.S. Madhavan's revisionary text titled "Ahalya" appeared in *Panchakanyakakal* too reiterated this theory of the establishment of justice through the exercise of female desire. As Deleuze conceive, the mythical character revisited consider desire as the force that makes humanity human. So the sociological parameters of morality, legality, legitimacy, ethics and prudence could



not prevent Ahalya who voiced her desire.

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