

Cannibalism in Art: An Analysis of Sujoy Ghosh's *Ahalya*

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Sujoy Ghosh's *Ahalya*, a short film of fourteen minutes and nine seconds went viral a few years ago. It is a 2015 Bengali short film with Soumitra Chatterjee, Radhika Apte and Tota Roy Chowdhury in the lead roles. The reason of its popularity is obvious. At one level, it is an inversion of the popular tale as told in the Ramayana. As legend has it, Lord Indra transformed himself into Parshuram in order to make love to his beautiful wife Ahalya. When Parshuram got to know the reality, he cursed Ahalya and she was turned into a stone. The cursed woman had to wait for 25 long years till Lord Rama touched and revived her. Ghosh's film reverses the outcome of adultery arising out of mistaken identity. The punishment by petrification is man's lot not the woman's. This liberation of the woman is the primary reason why the film enjoyed a connect with the masses. If the historical Ahalya was dominated by her husband's ideas of sexual purity, the modern Ahalya is comfortable in her sexuality. She is beautiful and gracefully seductive. If the historical Gautama could not bear his wife's mistaken encounter with another man, the modern Gautama unabashedly praises his wife's beauty. The film not only celebrates woman's sexuality but does poetic justice also. By re-writing the canonical tale, the film sets right the imbalance done centuries ago. It is interesting to note that Ghosh does not alter the basic structure of the myth; only the outcome. In both versions, the women are innocent. Like her counterpart, the modern Ahalya does not know she is committing adultery. But the men in both the tales are guilty of transgressing the boundary by cheating on the women. In Ghosh's version, IndraSen is turned to stone while Indra in the canonical text went scot free. The modern Ahalya is not a victim of

unjust punishment but she is definitely kept in dark by her husband's manipulations. She is still a victim. In this way, the film raises complex questions about sexual politics.

The film is as much about the politics of creativity as about the politics of sexuality. The artist considers his wife as his Muse but she herself doesn't know in what sense. She is blissfully unaware of the macabre and ghastly act of artistic creation that goes on under her nose. Gautama Sadhu is a world renowned artist but nobody knows the gruesomeness of the situation. Art feeds on life, kills it and then immortalizes it. The predatory gestures of the artist reveal him to be a shallow man. His dabbling in evil has a diabolic dimension.

The film could be contrasted with Edgar Allen Poe's short story *The Oval Portrait*. Here is another artist who considers his wife his Muse but exploits her to create art. She sits for him as he paints. Ironically, life drains out of her as the painting nears completion. Finally, the portrait becomes life-like whereas the wife drops dead. In both these texts, the ethics of art are problematized. Artistic creation is an outcome of the death of the model.

In *Ahalya* the artist's house is structured like a labyrinth. As the film opens, we get a glimpse of a trap with its Gothic twists and turns. It provides an apt setting for the horror and evil that ensues. The mysterious stone figurines who fall every time someone enters the house are men in thrall crying for liberation that never comes. The artist retains his sexual and creative prowess by trampling on young men. Thus, he violates the law of life by refusing to come to terms with ageing and decline of physical and mental powers. He robs young men of their lives by feeding parasitically on their youth and sustains himself. His sexual and creative vigour becomes a cannibalistic act. In J M Coetzee's novel *The Master of Petersburg*, the writer is someone who dabbles in evil and the process of writing is described as being possessed by demons. The novel, like Ghosh's film, complicates the liberal humanist view that art has an ennobling influence on human life.

Liberal humanism believes that art has a strongly moral purpose and it transcends the time and place in which it is created. A great text has universal themes and it refines the sensibilities of the reader/ viewer. SujoyGhosh's short film brings out the ugliness and horror at the heart of the creative process. It also debunks the idea of the artist as a superior being who has refined sensibilities than ordinary mortals and shows them the right path. Kirubhakar Purushothaman points out that the poem is a play on the good/ bad metaphor: "All the characters wear white outfits in the beginning of the film, and even the lamps and surroundings are in lighter shades... in the end once the suspense is revealed, Ahalya and her husband are seen in black" The film is thus a postmodern take on the process of artistic creation.

Works Cited

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