

For a couple of days, alone, in peace, allowing the tendrils of her mind to spread freely, with a contented feeling of having shed her burden, she bathed, dipped, played and came back with the pot full of water.

This did not go on for long.

She was walking back after a bath with bent glance, having let her mind wander, when she heard the tinkle of toe rings. Wives of some Rishis! They were also on their way to bathe in the river. As soon as they spotted her, they rushed away to avoid contact as though she were an outcaste, gave her a fearful look and proceeded.

“She is the one; she is Ahilya”, could be heard from a distance. These words scorched her more than the fire in Gautama’s innards that had given rise to the curse.

Her mind burned and roared like the flames at a cremation ground. Thoughts churned. “Dear god! Even if there has been redemption from the curse, will there never be redemption from the sin?” she agonized.

...The day declines and the horizon goes dim. Two people are walking towards Ayodhya along the edge of the Sarayu river.

Fourteen years have passed and merged with the floodwaters of Time. There are no munis or gods they have not glimpsed; not a holy place they have not visited. But peace of mind is the only thing they do not have.

Like a Shankara’s philosophical **edifice** that remains out of reach to the grasp of a man bereft of strength, they stood on weakly faltering legs and viewed the unattainable heights of Mount Kailasa from misty peaks.

They crossed deserts that seemed to be a metaphor for the **erosion** of faith which the burden of their pain had **engendered**.

They went around volcanoes that **spewed** smoking ash and dust like their scorched spirits.

They went up to look at the ceaseless waves of the ocean that battered the shore like their thoughts and retreated.

...Ahilya rejoiced in the thought that Sita and Rama would come to see them. And they did, as soon as the welcoming excitement subsided, without an attending retinue.

Rama, on whose brow experience had etched a network of lines, alighted from the chariot. Sita’s beauty had blossomed through her experience. The intense laughter of both evoked the ecstasy of **moksha**.

Gautama took Rama away with him on a stroll outside.

With the tender love like to one who had been carried in her womb, Ahilya escorted Sita inside. Both sat with faces wreathed in smiles.

Ravana carrying her away, the pain, the liberation – all this Sita related without the stains of anguish having faded away. After having been reconciled with Rama, where was the place for pain anymore?

She spoke about the agni pravesham, her ordeal through fire. Ahilya writhed in pain.

“Did He ask for that? Why did you do it?”

“He asked for it. I did it”, replied Sita calmly.

Both remained silent for a long time.

“Should it not be demonstrated to the world?” said Sita and laughed softly.

“Isn’t it enough for the heart to know? Is it possible to demonstrate the truth to the world?” questioned Ahilya. Conversation **languished**.

“In any case, will it become the truth through a demonstration? What if it never even touched the heart? Let it be; what of the world?” queried Ahilya.

The chariot rolled away; gradually the sound of the wheels subsided too.

Gautama stood there lost in thought...He went inside.

Ahilya was in a daze. Once again the Indra drama - the Indra drama that must needs be forgotten, was playing in the theatre of her mind.

Gautama embraced her.

To her it seemed to be Indra come in the guise of Gautama. Her heart congealed to stone. What peace!

Lying trapped in Gautama’s hands was a stone statue.

Ahilya turned into stone again.

The burden on the mind disappeared.

(Translated from Tamil by Malati Mathur)

4.4 DISCUSSION

The incident of Ahilya cursed by her husband, Rishi Gautama, for submitting to Lord Indra when he appeared in the guise of Gautama, and her redemption by young Rama, is a well-known episode that forms part of the *Ramayana*. The episode serves to reinforce the divinity of Rama and, as a **corollary**, the idea that there is redemption for even grave sins if there is submission and repentance. In addition, according to Jaya Srinivasan, Ahilya’s actions and the resultant curse are a warning that immoral behaviour leads to doom.

Early narratives portray Ahilya as consciously making the decision to accept Indra’s advances, having seen through his disguise as Gautama. She is said to have done this out of curiosity and flattered by his interest in her, as well as her pride in her incomparable beauty. As Jaya Srinivasan comments, “Ahilya was...sharp enough to recognise Indra’s disguise. Yet she **acquiesced** to his desire. In fact, being conscious of her beauty, she was proud to have been desired by Indra himself.”

However, later re-tellings **absolve** her of guilt and describe her as having been the victim of a cruel trick or of having been forced to submit to Indra's demands. All the narratives agree that she and Indra are cursed by her husband, the Rishi Gautama and while the nature of the curse may vary according to the text, they all reiterate that Rama would be the eventual cause of Ahilya's liberation from the curse. Interestingly enough, the Buddhist and Jain *Ramayana* do not feature the story of Ahilya.

In earlier versions of the story, Ahilya is purified by offering hospitality to Rama. Puranic tales were the first to describe her as being turned to stone and brought back to life by the touch of Rama's foot, a variation taken up by later versions as well.

Activity 2

In what way would the patriarchal mindset have impacted the reworking of Ahilya's story?

Tulsidas, in his *Ramacharitamansa*, as well as other poets of the Bhakti period view this episode as exemplifying God's saving grace as epitomized by Rama. The story is just one of many in the epic as it develops upon the divine aspects of Rama's character and the fulfillment of his destiny as an *avatar* but modern writers often tell the story from Ahilya's perspective. Pradip Bhattacharya says Ahilya is unique in her daring act and its dire consequences. For Bhattacharya, Ahilya is the eternal woman who responds to her inner urges and the advances of the divine ruler, a direct contrast to her ascetic husband, who did not satisfy her womanly desires. The author regards Ahilya as an independent woman who makes her own decisions, takes risks, and is driven by curiosity to experiment with the extraordinary and then accepts the curse pronounced on her by patriarchal society.

While Ahilya is a minor character in all ancient sources, **stigmatized** and despised by those around her for violating gender norms, the kind of attention that she has received from modern South Indian writers suggests that she is no longer an insignificant figure.

In *Sapa Vimochanam* (1943), celebrated Tamil writer Pudumaipithan takes up the tale of Ahilya from where Valmiki leaves it off in the *Ramayana* and talks of her life after the redemption. Where the epic focuses more on the transgression, the punishment and the subsequent redemption, the Tamil story brings Ahilya to the reader as a real person with thoughts and feelings.

Prema Nandakumar remarks, "Pudhumaipithan's imagery partakes of the **sulphurous** currents that keep the human body in thrall". She then goes on to cite the opening lines of the story in which the incomparable beauty of the figure sculpted in stone is described as being bound by the overwhelming sorrow in the eyes which would, at a glance, kill lust in any beholder.

Pudhumaipithan goes with the later version of the tale and assumes that Ahilya is innocent and a victim of Indra's trickery. When Rama is told the story of Ahilya's curse after he has redeemed her from it, he wonders: 'What kind of a world would penalize one for an action controlled neither by the heart nor the mind?' And Vishwamitra tells Gautama: 'To accept her who erred unknowingly would be the right thing to do'.

Pudhumaipithan also describes how Gautama regrets his hastiness in judging and condemning Ahilya: ‘Gautama could not speak to her with an unsullied mind as in earlier times. That day, when he had abused her as a **harlot**, it was as though he had scorched his very tongue.’ As he muses upon dharma, Gautama concludes that ‘Only actions that came about with mindfulness and self-awareness would leave stains...In his mind, Ahilya glided as one without blemish. He was the one who had been foolish he reflected; the anger which had fed the flame of his curse had defiled him.’

Although both feel a depth of tenderness and affection for each other, ‘yet, both of them suffered in their two different mind-prisons. Ahilya’s only worry was whether she was worthy of Gautama. Gautama’s only worry was whether he was worthy of Ahilya.’

Interestingly, there is also the description of what has been called “post-trauma repetition syndrome” in which Ahilya relives and re-experiences Indra’s seduction and Gautama’s fury over and over again: ‘Ahilya loved him greatly in a way that could not be measured...But the stone that had settled on her mind did not shift. She wished to conduct herself in a way such that no one would point fingers at her, why, even stare at her in a particular way. Consequently, her demeanour underwent a change from its natural disposition...fear lodged itself in her heart...She would speak only after having rehearsed the words a thousand times in her mind...She would agonize over whether there was any hidden meaning even in ordinary words uttered by Gautama.’

Activity 3

Why does Ahilya go over the past incidents over and over again?

So what did life after the redemption signify for Ahilya? It certainly wasn’t one of unalloyed joy at having been redeemed from the curse and given a second chance at life and marital bliss for, ‘Life itself had become the tortures of hell for her.’ She shied away from meeting anyone who came to visit them, refusing to meet the eyes of even those who approached with genuine love and concern as she felt that she could not do so with a pure heart.

Having started life anew, the couple experience pleasure in the visits of the youthful Rama and Sita, and the latter particularly seemed like a ‘dove that had come to alleviate the burden on Ahilya’s mind. To Ahilya, her speech and laughter seemed to scrub and rinse away the stains on her spirit. It was only in her presence that Ahilya’s lips would curve into a smile and the light of enthusiasm would gleam in her eyes.’ To Gautama, Rama ‘seemed to be the embodiment of the ideal youth. Even his laughter and playfulness, like self-replenishing lamps of *dharma shastra*, appeared to interpret the essence.’ And the obvious fondness that the couple shared reminds Gautama of his life in time past.

Ahilya is prepared to go for Rama’s coronation to Ayodhya but before that can happen, the forces that were unleashed ‘took away in one breath, Dasaratha’s life, banished Rama to the forest and sent off Bharata in tears and haircloth to Nandigram.’ Ahilya is so devastated by this that her ‘mind went back to the state when it had lain inert while she was an image of stone.’ It was as though her mind grows lifeless with the shock and sorrow, as when she had been in the stone-like state.

Gautama and Ahilya decide to go away to Mithila to be with their son. There, one day, when she is returning from her daily dip in the Ganga, Ahilya meets some women – the wives of other rishis. They recognize her and flinch from her presence as though she were an outcaste: “She is the one; she is Ahilya”. These words scorched her more than the fire in Gautama’s innards that had given rise to the curse. Her mind burned and roared like the flames at a cremation ground. Thoughts churned. “Dear god! Even if there has been redemption from the curse, will there never be redemption from the sin?” she agonized.’ The whispers and pointing fingers are an ongoing torment. What sort of redemption was this?

The two then set out on a long pilgrimage, returning only when fourteen years have passed, to await the return of Rama and Sita from the forest. As soon as the welcoming excitement subsides, the new king and queen of Ayodhya visit them and Sita tells Ahilya of all that had **transpired**, including her ordeal by fire. When Sita remarks with bitter irony that purity and innocence needs to be demonstrated to the world, Ahilya questions: ‘Isn’t it enough for the heart to know? Is it possible to demonstrate the truth to the world? In any case, will it become the truth through a demonstration?’ The allusion obviously is to her own experience wherein she feels that whatever happened between her and Indra never reached her heart as her heart always belonged to Gautama and could not be sullied by another’s touch.

When Gautama enters the hut after the royal guests have left, he finds Ahilya in a daze: ‘Once again the whole drama of Indra - the drama that must needs be forgotten, was playing in the theatre of her mind...Gautama embraced her. To her it seemed to be Indra come in the guise of Gautama. Her heart congealed to stone. What peace! Lying trapped in Gautama’s hands was a stone statue. Ahilya turned into stone again.’

Reverting to the state before her redemption by Rama is essentially the choice that Ahilya voluntarily makes not only because her life has become **abhorrent** to her in the **aftermath** of the curse but because of her intense rage over society’s injustice towards women. It is her protest against the hypocrisy of a patriarchal set up and the **arbitrary** judgment and punishment meted out to women as part of ‘dharma’. The Ahilya in the Tamil story emerges as a strong woman who, willingly turns to stone again, rejecting her redemption.

Prema Nandakumar comments that ‘There is a feverish glow about Pudhumaipithan’s Ahilya that does make the story feminist in essence.’ In ‘Sapa Vimochanam’, Pudhumaipithan brings Ahilya to life and casts her in a feminist mould, questioning and protesting against societal norms that are tragically **skewed** and heavily biased against women.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you read excerpts from ‘Sapa Vimochanam’ by the celebrated Tamil writer, Pudhumaipithan. You could see how the author portrays Ahilya as a sensitive woman who is tormented by her past and who, ultimately is filled with righteous anger and disgust at the double standards of society which had different rules for men and women.

4.6 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: A re-telling allows the narrator to bring in local cultural elements and to offer a fresh perspective.

Activity 2: The patriarchal mindset would condemn a woman's conduct in this situation in absolute terms and banish her to a state of non-existence, as though she did not deserve to live any longer.

Activity 3: Every word and action of the past still affect her behaviour and make her over cautious in whatever she does or says.

4.7 GLOSSARY

Abhorrent	: inspiring disgust
Absolve	: declare free from guilt
Acquiesced	: accepted
Afflictions	: disorders
Aftermath	: effects
Ahilya	: wife of the sage Gautama Maharishi, seduced by Indra, cursed by her husband for infidelity, and liberated from the curse by Rama.
Alleviate	: reduce
Arbitrary	: without a system
Ascetic	: hermit
Bereft	: deprived of
Congealed	: to change to solid state
Corollary	: resulting from something
Decrepit	: broken down
Edifice	: structure
Engendered	: gave rise to
Espousing	: supporting
Gautama	: Rishi, husband of Ahilya
Haircloth	: stiff, rough cloth
Harlot	: woman of loose character
Honed	: sharpened
Honorific	: title
Kannagi	: legendary Tamil woman who forms the central character of the Tamil epic <i>Silapathikaram</i> (100-300 AD).
Maricha	: rakshasa (demon), killed by Rama.
Moksha	: salvation

Pillaged	: looted
Sadananda	: son of Ahilya and Gautama
Skewed	: biased
Spewed	: erupt
Stigmatize	: condemn
Subahu	: a rakshahsa
Succour	: comfort
Sulphurous	: wicked
Tandava	: divine dance performed by Shiva
Thataka	: rakshasi, mother of Subahu
Transcendental	: relating to the spiritual
Transgressed	: break the law
Transpired	: happened
Vasishtha	: a rishi
Venerated	: respected
Vishwamitra	: a rishi
Whetstone	: a fine-grained stone used for sharpening cutting tools

4.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What is it that greatly troubles both Ahilya and Gautama after her redemption from the curse? Why do you think this is so?
- 2) Why does Ahilya shy away from meeting people? Is there any reason for her to do this?
- 3) What aspect of Sita's narration of the fourteen year exile touches Ahilya most? Why?
- 4) What do you think of Ahilya's voluntarily turning back into stone?

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