

**DELIVERANCE FROM CURSE: A TRANSLATION OF PUDUMAIPITTAN'S
SABHAVIMOSANAM BY LAKSHMI HOLMSTRONG**

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This paper intends to redefine feminism in *Deliverance from Curse*, a translation of Pudumaipittan's *Sabhavimosanam* by Lakshmi Holmstrong. While some religious texts may remain static over time, the Ramayana epic has been retold in a variety of ways over the centuries and across South Asia. Some of the narrative's most probing and innovative retellings have appeared in print in the last 100 years in the region of South India. The Ramayana has been known in many forms throughout South and Southeast Asia for almost two thousand years. This paper deals one incident in the epic: Ahalika's curse immediately following Sita's trial by fire as proof of her chastity and loyalty to her husband Rama.

The paper focuses on Pudumipittan's version of *Ramayana*. His short story *Sabhavimosanam* deals re - reading or re - defining feminism in his own style. What happens when the *Agni pravase*m performed Sita meets the beautiful Ahalya who had been transformed back to her human form after the deliverance of the curse by Lord Rama as a stone?. The author had made the two characters meet and share their views about the noble man Rama. It all begins with Ahalika's curse episode. " along the path, a stone, a form so beautiful that it inspired a leaping desire in the weariest onlooker. It was as if a sculptor of rare ability had appeared on this earth for this single work alone, and had put all his dreams into stone. But from the eyes of the figure a sadness - springs, overcoming the desires of the onlookers and plunging them into sadness too. For this is no sculptor's dream. This is the result of a curse. This indeed is Ahalya". (*Pudumaipittan* 128). The word `Ahalya` means without any deformation. Ahalya was the creation of Lord Brahma and the sister of the `Krittikas`. She was the most beautiful lady of her time. All the gods wanted to marry her. Her story is mentioned in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. Brahma kept condition that whoever surrounds three world's first shall marry Ahalya. Indra wanted to marry Ahalya. He used all his magical power to go around the three worlds and reached Brahma to take the hand of Ahalya. But sage Narada came and announced that Rishi Gautama had gone around the three worlds even before King Indra. He mentioned that as a part of a deity puja, Gautama went around a cow at his hermitage while the cow gave birth to a calf. According to Vedas, the cow at the time of bearing of the child is equal to the three worlds and Ahalya must be given to Gautama, not Indra. Thus Ahalya was married to Rishi Gautama.

Ahalya's beauty attracted the eyes of Indra, who was the king of the gods. He was looking for an opportunity whenever he could go near Ahalya and allure her. But the Rishi Gautama was always near Ahalya and so he got no opportunity. At last, he decided to take a devious means and approached the Sun God. The Sun god denied helping him in a diplomatic manner. But the Moon God gave him information that sage Gautama goes to river to bathe early each morning. He also said that the Rishi is away for a considerable period of time so that Indra could ravish with Ahalya without any fear of being caught. Moon also helped Indra by other means. He imitated the rooster's call in the middle of the night. Sage Gautama thought it was dawn and went to the Ganga. Indra knocked on Ahalya's door in the guise of sage Gautama.

Meanwhile the Rishi reached Ganga and as he stepped inside the water the holy Ganga informed him the unholy alliance taking part in his ashrama. The sage became furious and returned back to his hut. The moon was guarding the door in the guise of a cock. Angrily Gautama smote the cock with his towel, which left a permanent black mark on moon. Indra bumped against the angry sage. Now the sage turned his attention to his wife. He cursed her so that she turned into rock, lying to ashes, invisible to all creatures and unable to respond to anyone. Ahalya begged forgiveness. He modified the curse saying when Lord Vishnu touches as his incarnation 'Rama', Ahalya would come to life again, free from lust and folly and completely purified. Rama then touches the rock with his foot and brought Ahalya to her life. Ahalya was now redeemed from any sin and was grateful to Rama. Sage Gautama also appeared and blessed Rama. Gautama and Ahalya lived happily thereafter. (www.indianetzone.com > ... > Types of Religion in India > Hinduism)

Deliverence from Curse slowly shifts to the next episode. Sage Viswamitra along with Rama and Lakshmana returns back from his yaga. While walking through the forest Rama's feet touches the stone suddenly the stone transforms into Ahalya in her human shape. She falls at the feet of Rama, the divine man. She totally surrenders to his divine virtuousness. The character of Rama is glorified till date. Rama is the most popular symbol of chivalry and virtue. Rama - in the words of Swami Vivekananda is "the embodiment of truth, of morality, the ideal son, the ideal husband, and above all, the ideal king."(<http://hinduism.about.com/od/godsgoddesses/p/rama.htm>)

As a person, Rama personifies the characteristics of an ideal person (*Purushottama*) who is to be emulated. He had within him all the desirable virtues that any individual would seek to aspire, and he fulfils all his moral obligations (*Maryada*). Rama's purity and piety in his intention and actions inspires affection and devotion for him from a variety of characters from different backgrounds. For example, he gave up his rightful claim to the throne, and agreed to go into exile for fourteen years, to fulfil the vow that his father had given to Kaikeyi, one of King Dashratha's wives. This is in spite of the fact that Kaikeyi's son,

Bharat, begged him to return back to Ayodhya and said that he did not want to rule in place of Rama. But Rama considered his dharma as a son above that of his own birthright and his life's ambition. For such supreme sacrifices, and many other qualities, Rama is considered a *Maryada Purushottam* the best of upholders of Dharma, a basically human but exemplary figure. Some of his ideals are as follows: At the time when it was normal for kings to have more than one wife, Rama gave ideal of having a single wife. After Sita was banished, he was doing penance with a gold statue of Sita. In *Balakanda* of Valmiki *Ramayana* it is written that Rama and Sita resided in each other's heart.

(http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_are_the_good_characteristics_of_rama)

One washer man doubted the purity of Sita because she had stayed as a prisoner of Ravana. In the Royal Court, he further asks a question to Rama,

"O Noble king, as a perfect master you should always lead the most ideal life, above any reproach. There should not be darkness under the lamp! Our culture and tradition does not allow infidel woman to stay with her husband. She must be deserted/ banished. Sita has stayed in the custody of Ravana as a prisoner. What proof she has to prove her innocence and purity! Who will believe her? It will be better if you leave her. It will be in conformity with the noble tradition of Raghu Dynasty, as well as a just gesture on your part as the king of Ayodhya." (Ramayana)

Rama and the whole court were stunned to listen to these inauspicious words of the washer man. But who can hold the tongue of the masses? Who can shut the mouth that speaketh thus? Rama ordered for the 'Fire Test' *Agni pravasem* for Sita to prove her innocence and purity. But no such tests were given to Rama who too lived alone leaving his wife. The fire test given to Sita stands as an evidence that even today women fall into the eyes of suspicion when they live alone or single without their husband. Her chastity is been viewed only with doubt even when she remains chaste in the absence of her husband. This has been the fate of women ever since the days of *Ramayana*. The society blames only the women and not the man for chastity. Certain signs are used to know married women like applying *Kunkum*(red colour powder) on the head, wearing toe ring and wedlock denotes a married women but there are no such indications for men in general. This notion has to be re defined. Pudumaipittan re reads or re defines this faith and belief of society as a whole.

Later Rama and Sita come back to Rishi Gautama's hermitage. Ahalya now feels consoled and finds her happiness and joy speaking to Sita. Sita's words and smiles seemed to wash away Ahalya's stains. The translator narrates in *Deliverance from Curse* thus, "Sita told her everything without a tinge of sorrow - Ravana's abduction, her suffering and her release. When she spoke of entering the fire, Ahalya was shaken to core". She asks her, "Did he ask you to do it ?. Why did you do it?" " He asked me , I did it ," said Sita quietly " how could he ask you ?", shouted Ahalya , Kannagi's frenzy leaping through her mind. . One

law for Ahalya , quite another for Rama?. Was it a betrayal after all? A judgement which was equal to the curse that had poured out from Gouthama?.For a long time they were both silent. Didn't it have to be proved to the world"? Sita said laughing softly.(*Deliverance from Curse*144). Ahalya was breft of words. Now for Ahalya the character of Sita gets elevated, in her she sees true chastity and virtuousness which she once saw in Rama. Now the holy foot of Rama was unholy for her. Ahalya is not able to bear the fact of her deliverance of curse by Rama. Mixed up emotions fling her mind. A sense of prick is felt and Ahalya now decides to turn back into a stone as before. "Entrangled in Gauthama's arms lay a stone statue. Ahalya was stone once more" *Deliverance from Curse*145).

From a feminist perspective, Sita's story is illustrative of subjugation of women in Hindu culture especially in comparison to Durga, who is a symbol of female raw force: Sita fits the classic damsel in distress stereotype, waiting to be rescued by a man. Indeed she takes it a step further and refuses to be rescued by anyone other than *her* man. But Ahalya refuses to accept her deliverance of curse by Rama. Sita alone is suspected of adultery by Rama and his subjects, and forced to prove her innocence. Rama is never asked to undergo the trial by fire to prove he was faithful to her, and neither is he doubted by his subjects or by Sita. Rama banishes Sita to the forest for merely having been accused of adultery by citizens of Ayodhya.

Years later, when Rama meets her again through coincidence, he hesitates to take her back, causing Sita to call up her mother *Bhūmi* and be subsumed into the earth (which may arguably be a metaphor for suicide).

Thus from a feminist perspective, to hold Sita up as an example of the ideal woman and wife is to endorse male supremacy and female subservience; and to endorse Rama as the ideal husband is to endorse misogyny. Ahalya's transforming back to stone symbolises that women can no more be labelled as weaker sex. Today's Sitas and Ahalyas would neither go for Agni Pravesams nor prefer deliverance from curse from modern Ramas.

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