LITERATURE: A CLASSICAL TOOL OF SOFT POWER AND NARRATIVE BUILDING

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Abstract

Soft Power is a buzz word of the current times and refers to use of non-coercive use of cultural aspects to impact its audiences. Though this concept has increasingly been used with context to politics and international relations, one can trace its use from ancient times. 'Ideological State Apparatus' was a parallel concept developed by Marxist ideologist Louis Althusser to indicate the same in social and political parlance. Literature is one of the key cultural tools that that have impacted its target audiences since the birth of civilizations. Stories are a part of every society and have lived in the social DNAs of its people. These stories over time have built definitive narratives that reflected social realities and also social idealism of each time. This paper studies how a single story that enjoys mass popularity is modified over ages and used as soft power. The character of Ahalya from Valmiki Ramayana is studied to exemplify how concept of 'ideal' and 'femininity' kept changing over time. It studies Ahalya's story across three time-frames 1st Century to 10th Century C.E., 12th century to 17th century C.E. and 21st century C.E. The most popular text/s in each period for most of its audiences are studied.

Keywords: Soft Power, Narrative, Ahalya, gender role and gender ideal.

INTRODUCTION

The information age has changed the dynamics of interaction of human societies with 'content'. Each civilization through the course of its evolution has built institutions that regulate the society. Marxist anthropologist Louis Althusser defined them as repressive state apparatus (institutions that use coercive action to regulate the society such as police, army, judiciary etc.) and ideological state apparatuses (institutions that use non-coercive means to regulate and influence society such as literature, culture, media etc.). The onset of information age and globalization however sees the development of a concept of 'soft power'. Soft power refers to use of non-coercive mediums and institutions that are used to impact its audiences. This term found its origins with reference to politics and policy making in international relations; however, it also encompasses the aspect of social politics and narrative building. Narrative derived from narration refers to aspects of the story or series of stories that are highlighted by the narrator with specific objective of influencing its audiences in a desired manner. A story and narrative are hence interwoven concepts; however, narratives engage greater with their audiences and are the formal conscious tools used to impact its audience. (Corman). A story is an aural as well as visual medium and can travel across time and civilizations and keeps getting amended in the process. This amendment can be a natural process or a conscious choice to make it more palatable and suitable to its current audiences. This conscious changing of the story is a process of narrative building. These narratives can be used to impact society and social groups in desired manner. Though some stories have crossed borders and have been adapted to suit needs of different people, places and time, these changes have primarily been huge. While we find many parallels in mythologies of ancient Greece and Rome and characters which are exceedingly similar but with different names e.g. Goddess Athena from Greek culture and Goddess Minerva from Roman; both Goddesses of wisdom, both sprung forth as fully formed adults; they still have their origin in 2 distinct cultures that are now extinct. One can make theoretic assumptions about the narratives formed around such stories and characters, the originating civilizations of which are no more. However, India in this respect is unique. Indian culture (the culture of Vedic Aryans) is not extinct but a living entity. It has not only sustained over time, but has also assimilated other races, religions and peoples as they came to settle in Indian subcontinent. Hence, the stories of ancient Aryans are not just records of by-gone past but living entities themselves. Some of the oldest literary texts in India are the epics Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These stories believed to have been a part of oral tradition over past five thousand years, were brought in written form around 2nd Century BCE to 2nd century CE. (D. Patnaik). These highly popular stories have been told and retold over centuries and one can see major as well as the minor changes made in certain events or characterizations over time. While this can be a natural process, the changes especially in case of female characters in the text seem to reflect psyche of the women and the society in which they lived. This literature hence becomes a medium of soft power used by the dominant group to directly and indirectly impact its audiences through narrative changes. This paper traces these changes and explores their rationale by studying the character of Ahalya from the Ramayana.

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OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To study the narrative changes in character of Ahalya from the Ramayana.
- To assess whether narrative changes reflect the psyche of society in respective time frames.
- To analyse whether and how Ahalya's identity expounded through literature over time has been a tool of soft power.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Systematic Research design has been used for the purpose of this study. The portrayal Ahalya in chosen texts of study have been analyzed with respect to their previous renditions by other authors. Four texts have been chosen has primary data source for in-depth analysis: Time frame 1 (1st Century to 10th Century C.E.): (i) Valmiki Ramayana translated by Bibek Debroy. Time frame 2 (12th century to 17th century C.E.) (ii) Tulsi Ramayana. Time Frame 3 (21st century C.E.) (iii) Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana' by Devdutt Patnaik and (iv) 'Ahalya' by Koral Dasgupta. Content Analysis of textual materials has been conducted using the theoretical literary frameworks of Narratology and Gender studies.

THE EVER-EVOLVING AHALYA

Ahalya is a character from the Valmiki Ramayana. She is portrayed as the wife of Gautama Muni. Certain interesting aspects about her are that she was created by the creator Bramha himself from finest things in the world and hence she is ayonija (the one not born from a womb). She was married to sage Gautama. She had coitus with the king of Gods Indra while he had assumed the form of Gautama rishi. Angered by her transgression Gautama rishi turned her into a rock only to be revived by Rama, the 7th incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Rama accepting her meant that her sins were forgiven and that she was free to join society yet again. Not much variation or addition is found to Ahalya's story through the years. Across all the texts in discussion 3 things remain common, Ahalya being created by Lord Bramha, she being the wife of Gautama rishi and she being revived by Rama. There is only one aspect that changes across all three time-frames and that is the matter and manner of her transgression.

The Valmiki Ramayana clearly states that Lord of the Gods Indra was attracted to Ahalya and hence, when Gautama rishi was out for his morning rituals he assumed the form of the rishi and had coitus with Ahalya. He was under the impression that Ahalya is unaware that he is not actually Gautama rishi. However, post their coitus Ahalya addressed disguised Indra and said "O lord of Gods, make haste and return, my husband is approaching". This proclamation is shock to Indra as well as the audience. It is quite clear that Ahalya was not only aware that the this was not her husband, but she also knew exactly who it was thus disguised. (Debroy) Upon his return, Gautama rishi saw Indra dev disguised as him and Ahalya, he understood what must have transpired and cursed them both. Ahalya's curse was that she would be turned into a stone (this is a metaphor, it means that she would be ex communicated) and that she will reunite with him only once she was accepted by Prince Rama, the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu. (Debroy). It is interesting to note that Ahalya from Valmiki Ramayana did not protest her husband's declaration but meekly accepted the punishment thus given to her. Subsequently when Rama arrived at that ashram with rishi Vishwamitra and touched the stone, it transformed into a woman. Once again this has to be understood as a metaphor of Rama having accepted Ahalya and her hospitality, thus deeming her worthy of welcoming Gods. Once she was thus declared innocent or alternately having served her punishment she once again reunited with her husband.

The Tulsi Ramayana is supposed to be written in late 16th century CE. Saint Tulsidas was also thought of as the reincarnation of Valmiki and his Ramayana also known as Tulsi Ramayana was and remains popular in India as one of the most revered versions of Ramayana written in Bhakti tradition. Tulsidas has reimagined Ramayana by making most of its characters into varying symbols of the bhakti tradition. While the religious and pedantic symbolism of Ahalya is not under consideration here, her story surely is. Tulsi Ramayana states that Indra duped Ahalya in the guise of Gautama rishi. However, a major difference from the source text is that Ahalya has been depicted to have been unaware of Indra's true identity. Upon being discovered by her angry husband Ahalya cries and tries to tell him how she is not guilty as she was genuinely unaware of that fact that the man with her was not her husband. However, she feels shamed for being thus duped and in great sorrow accepts the punishment meted out by her husband. Upon realizing that Ahalya is indeed innocent and this case a victim, Gautama rishi assures her that she will be "purified" upon being touched by Rama and thus absolved of all her crimes. (Motilal) While rest of the story remains the same. The major distinctions are Ahalya's state of unawareness and her being vocal upon discovery.

The third sets of accounts under consideration in this paper are 2 modern texts namely 'Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana' by Devdutt Patnaik and 'Ahalya' by Koral Dasgupta. Both these texts are products of 21st century and both authors hail from a post-colonial India who are educated in western education systems and have been well aware of feminist movements of both the orient and occident. One can see that while 'Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana' narrates the tale from Valmiki Ramayana while providing rationale for

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Ahalya's behaviour and sanctifying her lack of guilt, (D. Patnaik) the second text 'Ahalya' uses the symbolism of bhakti period to state that Indra here is not the actual God Indra, but it is Gautama rishi himself who is unable to stay stoic and gives in to demands of his 'indriyas' (baser needs) and copulates with Ahalya. Once fever of passion recedes, he realizes that thus giving in to baser needs has destroyed his tapas of many years, he curses Ahalya in anger because she was the agent of his loss. (Dasgupta)

We can clearly see that though the macro story of Ahalya remains the same, there is dramatic shift in narrative and treatment in all three time-frames. Though Valmiki Ramayana does not provide any rationale for Ahalya's choices, we can find the reference of the same in another ancient text called the Devi Puarana. The devi purana clearly states that Bramha Dev fashioned Ahalya out of all things beautiful in the world to chastise a celestial nymph Rambha who believed herself to be most beautiful woman in the world and had hence turned vain and arrogant. Upon achieving his objective, Bramha dev handed this child (Ahalya) to Gautama rishi to be raised. Gautama rishi dutifully raised her without once feeling attraction to the most beautiful blossoming girl who was living with him. Once she reached puberty, Gautama rishi returned her to Bramha dev. Pleased with his abstinence and purity of thought, Bramha dev asked Gautama rishi to take Ahalya as wife. Indra dev was angered with this decision because he believed that as king of Gods he deserved all the best things in the world and held on to that grudge waiting for the right opportunity. Upon finding such an opportunity, he assumed the form of Gautama rishi and had coitus with Ahalya. This background provided by the Devi Purana helps once rationalize Ahalya's behaviour. (Bhattacharya) It comes as no surprise that Ahalya who was raised believing Gautama to be a father figure and trusted guardian, was then expected to see and serve him as a husband. While modern day psychologists could have a field day with ramifications of such an act on Ahalya, it helps the readers understand why she must have accepted to have coitus with Indra dev despite knowing that he is not her husband. She probably wished to explore her body and that of a man who was not her guardian turned husband. Her curiosity thus gets justified. This also helps one understand why Ahalya accepted her husband's punishment but neither displayed any repentance nor verbally apologized. She accepted the consequences of her actions but did not find her actions to be as immoral as one may deem. While Ahalya's curiosity seems to be acceptable for its ancient audiences, the 16th century audience is not as understanding. Did Tulsidas show Ahalya as a victim due to the demands of his creative text and its thematic demands or was he responding to social conventions of his time is a subject worth pondering. It is possible that it's a bit of both. Medieval Indian society was more socially rigid and had a tighter noose of norms for its women. Narrative changes such as Ahalya's show, that the audience was shown how even as a victim, one has to bear punishment of being unfaithful to one's husband. The modern-day narratives on the other hand seek a balance of both previous narratives, we see them accepting Ahalya's choices and we also see them de-abstracting traditional values attached to morality.

CONCLUSION

All three versions of the Ahalya story are a clear example of how a popular story can be narrativized to make them acceptable to audiences of their time. One can also see how these narratives exert an influence on their audience in a normative manner, thus acting as tools of soft power. As long as human societies exist, stories and their narrative potential shall as well. While this can seem like a dangerous tool of soft power, stories can also be shaped to facilitate inclusion, equality and empowerment. One can only hope that with deeper understanding of the potential of stories, they will be used for social good through education and policy making.

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