

Ahalya

(Sujoy Ghosh, 2015)

Film Review by

Sherfina Chan
Lauren Dutton
Sanya Lakhani
Hrithik Poojara
Demetri Suttle

Written for the [Global Media Festival](#), a one-night screening event sponsored by the School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication at the University of Texas at Dallas. Organized and presented by the students in ATCM 3325–Global Media Cultures.

Ahalya is a Bengali short film created by Sujoy Ghosh set in Kolkata, the capital of India's West Bengal. Famous for his crime-filled movies and nail-biting plots, Ghosh is also known for featuring female leads in his popular thrillers, such as *Kahaani* (2012). The foregrounding the female lead's agency in *Ahalya* follows the trend that Ghosh has established for his films.

The short film is Ghosh's reimagining of a famous Hindu myth as a thriller. In the original mythology, the king of the gods Indra dresses up as Ahalya's much older husband Gautama in an attempt to seduce her. She sees through his disguise but falls for his seduction nonetheless. Once caught, Gautama curses them both. Ahalya turns into stone, and returns to human form only when Rama, god of purity and marital devotion, brushes her with his foot. The Hindu myth addresses the ideas of chastity, infidelity, and gender norms.

In the film, Ghosh retells the story in a modernized way. Instead of the king of gods, Indra is now a policeman who visits the house of an artist named Goutam. There, he looks for any information involving a missing man. During the investigation, Indra ends up becoming infatuated and distracted by the beautiful Ahalya, the wife of Goutam. Goutam tells Indra that a rock can change one's appearance and tempts Indra to use the rock to disguise himself as Goutam, and then go meet his wife. Indra agrees and when he and Ahalya are alone, he realizes through a mirror that his appearance was that of Goutam's and ends up embracing Ahalya as she holds him.

As an artist, Goutam has several dolls sitting on a shelf that he has made, and these dolls curiously fall off the shelf throughout the film. It is revealed later that these dolls hold the trapped souls of their likeness within them, constantly struggling to escape, which result in the dolls falling off of the shelf. In the end, the audience sees Indra trapped as a doll, indicating his curse and punishment for allowing himself to seduce a married woman.

The film also modernizes the Hindu myth because instead of Ahalya being a victim in Indra's seduction, she becomes an accomplice. She gains the power and authority to use her sexuality as she pleases. She also challenges traditional gender norms in that she is able to present herself in a sensual way without relying on the patriarchy to tell her how to do it. She still remains faithful to her husband, but gets to own her sexuality. Through these slight changes to the characters and their roles, the film still addresses issues of sexuality and gender norms, but also alludes to how a woman is in charge of her body, marriage, and life.

In many parts of India, women are often subjected to violence and criticism from their husbands and other men in their lives. Societal norms still expect women to be modest, wearing non-revealing clothes and conforming to traditional family ideals. Many women also have to rely on their husbands or other men to survive due to income inequality between men and women. In the film, Ahalya represents the opposite of these norms. She is seen wearing a simple dress akin to a nightgown. She dresses in a way that is comfortable and shows off her skin. She is also seen casually walking around the home in a carefree way. Her husband questions why she stays with him and even encourages her to find a younger man, but Ahalya admits that she wants to stay with him. She is not forced in any way to be his wife and does not act in any submissive way. In the mythology, Ahalya continues to follow the traditional gender norms of how women should not commit adultery and should be submissive to her husband but, in the film, Ahalya represents feminist ideals of how women are equal to men and should be allowed to have a choice in what they want to do and who they choose to be with.

The other element that stands out in the film is the policeman Indra. As the film progresses, we see his inner conflict, whether he gives into the married woman, or he upholds his morals and does not commit any kind of infidelity. Policemen should be people who uphold the law. They are supposed to be respected as people who keep peace and keep crime off the streets. However, Indra represents another side of the police in India: weak, distrustful, and lack of morals. The police force in India are highly understaffed and often lack the resources needed to stop and prevent crimes. Interaction with the police is often frustrating, time-consuming, and costly, causing the distrust between them and the citizens. When Indra falls for Ahalya and acts on his feelings for her, his decision shows that he is weak, easy to be swayed, and willing to ignore the fact that she is married, as long as he is able to satisfy himself and his feelings. His actions go against any morals toward marriage and this makes him untrustworthy because he did not think about the consequences of his actions.

Ghosh relies on various film techniques, particularly camera work, to put Indra's wavering resolve into perspective. Whenever Indra looks at Ahalya and certain parts of her body, the camera pans or cuts into immediate medium shots of her body parts, where Indra is looking. This gives the audience insight on exactly what Indra was looking at and gives us his point of view on how he is distracted by her body. The camera also shows medium close-up shots on Indra's face to highlight his emotions: whenever he was flustered at the touch of Ahalya, his nervousness when she looks at him, and his longing gaze at her. This gives the audience a clear understanding of how he felt and emphasizes how strong his desire was for her.

In the closing scene, Indra screams for help in a dark space, as he has turned into one of the dolls that sit upon the shelf. The extreme close-up shots of his face at various angles and the shots showing his body in a very tight space emphasizes his distress and confusion as to where he was and how he got there. The camera wobbles and falls, indicating that he has fallen off the shelf. Ghosh also uses sound techniques to amplify Indra's desperation as he is stuck inside the doll. The sound of his screams for help are being muffled as we see him from the outside of the doll not moving at all while he struggles to break free from inside. These techniques align the audience with Indra's perspective. At first, they are complicit in Indra's lust and predicament to seduce Ahalya. In the end, they must feel like they too are turned into a doll. While in the mythology the sinner reaches redemption and turns back into a human, the film offers no such redemption, indicating that there may not be a way to redeem oneself for certain actions and misguided judgement.

To better understand this film, we must define adaptation as a process of encoding and decoding. Encoding refers to the strategies a filmmaker relies on to tell their story: the production techniques, the original story and modified elements, and the formal strategies (editing, camerawork, etc.). Decoding refers to how the points of reference the audience has to interpret what they see and understand the meanings of a text. *Ahalya* is based on a mythology that expected women to be faithful and submissive partners and condemned infidelity, individuality, and curiosity among women. For his film, Ghosh uses the same characters, but instead changes some elements so that Ahalya has the opportunity to make her own choices and decide what to do with her own sexuality and individuality. Ghosh's encoding of the story makes it more modern, with its characters having certain roles that the audience is familiar with. In decoding these story changes, audiences gain insights on feminist values and the culture of how women rebel against traditional gender norms, as well as a criticism towards weak policemen who lack proper morals.

Recreating this myth by treating infidelity and punishment through a feminist lens can make the story relatable in other parts of the world that are also addressing these social issues. The story's adaptation allows a global audience to recognize similar problems in their own culture and society. Telling the story in this way also makes it more entertaining and allows the audience to soak up the fantastical elements presented in the film, but still understanding the representation of real-life problems in society. Recoding the story makes it more relatable as it uses a specific story to address broader topics. Ghosh turns the traditional story of Ahalya into a story about women's rights and the weakness of men and the police force, drawing on various film techniques to build the narrative, emphasize certain emotions, and implicate the audience in these issues as well.