

# Ahilya's Daughter: An Archetypal Study of the Film Astitva

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**Abstract –** The article interprets the presence and implications of myths in the Hindi movie Astitva with an archetypal perspective. In Astitva, we see a woman, despite all her steadfastness in her love and duties, being banished from her husband's heart due to her chance sexual encounter with her music instructor once. Before passing value judgments on her predicament, it needs to be comprehended beyond particular contexts and codes. Mythological templates help us in doing that and in making us be empathetically convinced as well.

In the wake of mythology and cinema's presence everywhere around us in the form of names, brands, literary allusions, and the psychological influence they have on people to make their characters their role models, this study takes up the two to explore the possibility of their working hand in hand, in addition to their old association of one just offering the 'material' to the other to work upon. The pedagogical or the psychological function of mythology, as propounded by Joseph Campbell, serves as the yard stick to analyse the mythical aspect of the chosen movie.

**Key Terms:** Archetypal, Myth, Mythological, Hero, Psychological

*"If we can learn to recognize the heroes, demonic or shadow figures, and godlike images that occur over and again throughout the history of the human imagination, we may fare better when they beset us personally. Recognizing the archetypes might save us from succumbing to stereotypes" [1].*

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## INTRODUCTION

Myths are the tales which, even if not necessarily true or factual, highlight fundamental truths and psychological insights about human nature and behaviour in given circumstances. They consist of human experiences of universal nature that have been retold manifold times in varied version, and shall be told in the same manner in the future as well. Although myth and archetype critics speak of the recurring presence of the archetypes in literature and studies in Indian writing prove this also, we are still lagging behind as far as their presence in Film goes. Like literature, in cinema also certain "narrative designs, patterns of actions, character types, themes, and images" denoted collectively by the word 'archetypes', recur [2]. In fact, cinema is a much more powerful mirror to life and societies in general and can influence a person more effectively than any other art on account of its engaging all the seven 'intelligences' - "the logical (plot), the linguistic (dialogs), the visual-spatial (pictures, colors, symbols), the musical (sounds and music), the interpersonal (storytelling), the kinesthetic (moving), and the intra-psychic (inner guidance)" [3]. Even the Supreme Court of India, while necessitating censorship of films, declared:

...a film motivates thoughts and action and assures a high degree of attention and retention as compared to the printed word, the combination of act and speech, sight and sound in semi darkness...will have a strong impact on the minds of the viewers and can affect emotions. Therefore it has as much potential for evil as it has for good and has an equal potential to instill or cultivate violent or good behaviour" [4].

According to Jung, "there are as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life" [5], therefore, all the archetypes which recur frequently in literature, can be traced and analysed in films as well. For example, Northrop Frye's (1957) archetypal theory of the four major genres of literature (comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony), corresponding to the four major natural seasonal cycles (the myths of spring, summer, fall, and winter respectively), and other various archetypes related to numbers, colours, aspects of a human being like hero, goddess as a genial or dark force, shadow, trickster etc.

Joseph Campbell, who spent a significant period of his scholarly life to establish and promote revolutionarily the presence, meaning and role of

mythology in the current context, tells four functions of mythology: the reconciliation of our "waking consciousness to the ... (dread and alluring mystery) of this universe as *it is*", "to render an interpretive total image of the same, as known to contemporary consciousness", "the enforcement of a moral order: the shaping of individual to the requirements of his geographically and historically conditioned social group", and "to foster the centring and unfolding of the individual in integrity, in accord with d) himself (the microcosm), c) his culture (the mesocosm), b) the universe (the macrocosm), and a) that awesome ultimate mystery which is both beyond and within himself and all things"[6].

This article focuses on the study of the above stated film with the mythological approach; to explore the presence of certain analogous archetypes in it. The protagonist has been studied in the wake of the fourth function of mythology as explained by Campbell, which is taken as a benchmark to trek into her inner landscape.

The wisdom lying in our ancient textbooks which are part of our collective mythology which, if laid bare of its exotic, archaic, shiny, exaggerated garbs, reveals the panacea to all kinds of our emotional, psychological, social, and communicational problems. The point is: it needs to be seen not dogmatically, but differently. The researcher made a unique effort in this direction by studying movie *Astitva* in the light of the renowned Mythologist, Joseph Campbell's following statement:

There is no final system for the interpretation of myths, and there will never be any such thing...the function of ritual and myth is to make possible, then to facilitate, the jump-by analogy...[...].The mighty hero of extraordinary powers- able to lift Mount Govardhan on a finger, and to fill himself with the terrible glory of the universe- is each of us: not the physical self-visible in the mirror, but the king within" [7].

The reason for taking up this movie for consideration is that it reflects the events or characters of our mythology that still have moral and social repercussions on the changing values system in society. By analysing it according to Campbell's interpretation of the significance of myths, an insight into the life of Aditi, the lead character of the movie; her nature, aspirations, attitude, disappointing or encouraging consequences of her deeds, is provided. The discussion presents an assertion that mythology is a torchbearer personified for humankind, as it proves to be the case with this character. Consequently, the study raises many related questions pertaining to the meaning and explanation of myths, the inter-relation of mythology and cinema, and the validity of the power of myths in the present scientifically advanced age.

The mythological films in Indian context seem to be an effort to cash in upon the general mindset of the public for purely commercialized purpose. They cater to the major part of society because they appeal to their

sensibility as religion and mythology is so deeply embedded and rooted in their psyche that its representation will appease them, will create what Coleridge called 'suspension of disbelief' despite its fancy and mystified nature.

However, the question 'why does mythology appeal to us?' remains still largely unanswered, or rather unresolved. Another question entailed with this is 'why do movies appeal to us?' The answer to it, though again opaque, is that there is something in them which strikes a chord within us. Or that we identify with their characters or situations that in turn induce cathartic process to relax us. Well, relaxation and relief is ok but what about the solution? Or improvement? Or improvisation?

This study reinterprets the presence of mythology in Films and highlights its significance in human life; to reinvent and recreate the ancient traditions in such a unique way that they serve as the torchbearer for the people they have been belonged to for so long. Unfortunately, both Mythology and Films are till now often liked only for their entertainment value, or with a view to provide the fanciful, adventurous, and exotic means to impart some moral/ethical lessons to the children, such as the stereotypical good versus bad formula. Like reading of fiction was, and still to some extent is considered only for its recreational quality, films are also more of a means of mere entertainment to most of us, which need not be engaged in seriously otherwise we risk illusions. We forget most of the time that they have their positive contribution towards human minds and the moods of the society.

And Cinema, being the most popular, accessible, and with a direct appeal between the two, can be the best medium of disseminating the psychological wisdom of mythology. This article unravels the potentiality and utility of films as such medium. Interestingly, the most befitting manner in which this can be done is the psycho-analytical method, as propounded by Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, of looking into mythological elements/patterns i.e., archetypes in popular cinema so as to tap our sensibility in such a way that they infuse such confident spirit in us that the adventures presented before us seem realistic when brought down to the level of our own lives, and can be taken upon courageously.

Thus, a new understanding of the definition of the genre of mythological films can be developed. It is to stir humanity to recognize an implicit moral and psychological significance in mythology.

Noticeably, cinema has constantly been the mirror of our society and source of its fantasy, changing itself with the changing times. Filmmakers have come up with innovative ideas in movies and leaving aside the oft-trodden path, are doing commendable job of breaking the traditional mould by representing the

changed revolutionary milieu with a message of hope in their realistic movies. Cinema, with its wide-ranging and far-reaching portrayals of a culture, transcending all other forms of entertainment, has the capacity to engage its people by facilitating the continued supply of the archetypes from their mythological sources to the minds. Additionally, it in turn makes them aware of the individual and social models to mould their lives upon. The same conviction emerges through the analysis of this movie, *Astitva*.

Mythology, in the form of the essentially and eternally same archetypal patterns, themes, character types etc. naturally gets resemblance in films. On the other hand, cinema, by projecting them in the contemporary cultural scenario makes people aware of their presence in their own lives, as ordinary people identify more easily with their cinematic portrayal than their grand depiction in the myths. Cinema has the potential to underline that identification which can be traced to the immense pool of mythological tales to our live surroundings. Certainly, films help us identify such similarities with the mythic characters that live on through the changing times and civilizations, evolved according to the age. And this is what emphasizes the synergetic connection between past and present, between evolutionary changes and perpetuity, highlighting our existence in the same fluid civilization.

### **ASTITVA: AN OVERVIEW**

Mahesh Manjekar's movie *Astitva* is the story of Aditi, a dedicated housewife with a very busy husband Srikant and an engaged to be married son, Aniket. The story opens with Aditi having arranged an impromptu lunch for Srikant's friend Ravi, and his wife Meghana, when a letter bearing the will of Malhar Kamat, Aditi's music teacher twenty five years back, arrives, wherein he leaves all his property in her name. Srikant gets suspicious, goes back to his daily diary, and confronts Aditi and gets the revelation about Aniket's being Kamat's son. The story that comes out is: a newly married Aditi, is almost always alone at her home on account of her husband being out on business tours. She is bored, and frustrated staying by herself, without a child, without much of the husband's company. Srikant does not allow her to work and shows his inability to take her along. He somehow agrees to her resuming music practice. Malhar kamat is the teacher who grows a soft corner towards her. Aditi tries to find solace in music but her heart longs for vicinity and togetherness with Srikant. All her desires to enjoy romance and life remain subdued. And one day while it's raining and she gives in to her weakness with Kamat, though uttering the name of Srikant. On realization later, she is filled with guilt, dismisses Kamat, and wants to tell Srikant. Her sister advises her against it. When she discloses her pregnancy to Srikant, he is elated doubly as he has got a good contract for his own business also. Aditi, though wanting to tell, finds it difficult to do so in wake of Srikant's excitement, for fear of losing it all.

Unable to bear the fact of Aditi's infidelity, he seeks to avenge himself by making Aditi re-tell the past before his friend couple and Aniket as well. He disowns her and Aniket also disclaims her, despite her repeated pleas to be forgiven. Although Meghana offers to take her home, Aditi seems resolved and politely refuses and in the end we see her going away with Revati, Aniket's fiancée who breaks off her engagement upset with Aniket's insensitive and male chauvinistic behaviour like Srikant.

The researcher found in the film the streaks of the mythic Ahilya story wherein Ahilya, the wife of sage Gautam, is punished by him due to her chance infidelity. She is disowned by the sage and turned into a stone; banished to live a secluded, abandoned, and uncared for existence. After much pleading, he tells the way of salvation by Lord Ram's grace at the time of his arrival in the deserted hermitage, which happens on Ram's way to Mithila for the Sita swaymvar. Aditi like Ahilya, is also forced to live in abstinence on account of Srikant's absence from home most of the time for his career uplift. She is also not able to protest Kamat though not being unfaithful to Srikant in her mind or soul. And later when the fact is disclosed and she faces the threat of desertion from Srikant and Aniket both, she actually shows the symptoms of being inert like a stone, as Ahilya supposedly remained. Ram was Ahilya's redeemer whereas Revati proves to be so for Aditi.

If we draw parallels between the two stories excluding the given time and circumstances, the essence is:

- i) A severe, humiliating punishment for an act of weakness on the wife's part.
- ii) The emergence of a new, liberated, independent entity in the end, after a long period of ordeal

The study does not intend to rationalize or decry the reaction of the husbands in any of the stories (If Gautam's verdict is too cruel for the committed act, Srikant himself has not been loyal to Aditi); the researcher sees a template for a woman to act upon. If the single-minded focus, service, love and care of a wife are balanced lesser than her one act in a moment of weakness, that too on account of her counterpart's lack of concern for her wishes and needs, she had better carve out her own journey ahead, though it evolves an inner or outer struggle. This aspect of the film story is treated separately under the application of the Hero's Journey to *Astitva*.

### **ASTITVA: A HERO(INE)'S JOURNEY ON CAMPELL'S LINES:**

Joseph Campbell saw a similar pattern underlying the heroic myths of all the cultures. He collectively

called them 'monomyth'. The heroes bearing the more or less same qualities collectively came to be called 'the hero'. In all the mythologies, the hero sets out on his/her adventurous journey for some purpose in mind, explicit or implicit, come across various hurdles and difficult trials, gains allies or enemies, overcomes them, gets his booty, and returns, fighting back the hurdle creators. Although Campbell discusses the Hero's Journey with illustrations from the mythologies around the world, as is clear from his statement in the introducing paragraph of this study, essentially it is a psychological journey epitomized in the physical one i.e. any ordinary person can be a hero with his/ her own life journey ahead, where s/he can identify the same kind of phases, with a freedom of interpretation. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell divides the Hero's journey into three stages: Departure, with five sub stages; Call for adventure, Refusal of the call, Supernatural Aid, Crossing of the first threshold, and Belly of the Whale. Second is the Initiation stage with six sub stages; The Road of trials, Meeting with the Goddess, Woman as temptress, Atonement with the Father, Apotheosis, and the Ultimate Boon. The third stage is that of Return with five sub stages; Refusal of the return, the Magic Flight, Rescue from without, the Crossing of the return threshold, Master of two worlds, and Freedom to Live.

The practice of Movie scripts being designed and analyzed in view of the Hero Journey pattern, which involves a number of archetypes including the hero archetype itself, has been there in West for long and psychotherapists use the cinema therapy to heal their clients of their problems, through using mythological stories as templates for the clients to identify their kind of pattern, learn themselves in a better light, and be at peace with the self. The researcher took up the movie *Astitva* for this purpose to showcase that Aditi fits the archetypal hero of Campbell in her own way; the hero's story can be Aditi's story in 'reel' life and Aditi's story can be any woman's story in 'real' life. If movies are made and taken with such a mission, essential social change will not be a far cry.

Aditi's Departure from her mundane routine life begins when she is advised by Srikant to take up music practice. This is her Call for Adventure which she agrees to reluctantly. She meets her Mentor in the form of Malhar Kamat in whose company she learns to loose herself with the power of music and feel liberated of her burdensome depression due to loneliness.

All of these changes happen within the periphery of her being as a wife, dovetailed to the husband; seeking every comfort within just that stretch. Nevertheless, there comes the moment of Crossing this Threshold when she yields to her desires physically with Kamat.

She goes through torturous pangs of guilt and shame afterwards, and vacillates between hiding and revealing the truth to her husband. Her sister Sudha

convinces her not to do that. She is pregnant with Kamat's child but Srikant doesn't know it and Aditi, pushing that episode in the past lives a life of silent contentment serving her family devotedly. This phase of her journey is most prolonging, as if she is having the opportunity to build up all that for the required transformation.

The moment comes when Srikant confronts her about Aniket's birth. This is the Belly of the Whale phase in Aditi's life journey. She feels shame, guilt, fear, insecurity, humiliation, all gathered to make a mess of her life. She seems to have lost it. But then, she has to face the enemy i.e. an egoist Srikant, who blinding himself to all her virtues, sticks to one fact of which he himself should be guilty. So, a new courage comes to aid and she braces herself to accept the truth before Ravi, Meghana, and Aniket, having prepared herself for the Trials and tribulations in the process. She receives spiteful abuses from the son and a cruel hint of desertion from the husband. Aditi's situation in the face of their apathy is heart rending. She again seems to be falling apart amid her pitiable pleadings to both the males in her life.

However, she gets respite from this situation in the form of Ravi and Meghana who come to her aid now. Meghana in fact seems to be the mythic sympathetic woman and thus it's the phase of Meeting with the Goddess. Even a reflection of the Atonement with the Father can also be extracted in the understanding support Aditi receives in Ravi, in whom, along with in Meghana, she can place her trust and sustain herself when there is no such hope from Srikant or Aniket. This helps her in overcoming her own sense of guilt and save her pride from being crushed.

Aditi reaches her stage of Apotheosis, wherein the turmoil brewing inside her stops and as if some new realization has occurred, she seems to be at peace with herself. Out of the moments of a deathlike experience comes a new life.

Towards the end, she exhibits what Campbell calls "an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transformation, freedom)" [8]. A new Aditi, who has complete hold on her life now, takes birth. The kind of meaningful existence (*astitva*) and sufficiency she had desired for so long with Srikant but never realized is lying ahead now. Now, once she sees her identity separate from her husband and son, she no longer finds herself vulnerable. She emerges as an independent self-sufficient, and strong Aditi with her Ultimate Boon; her self-actualization. What seemed to be unconquerable previously is conquered now.

Finally, the Return stage arrives when she leaves Srikant's house with her new found reward of her struggles. It is her Magic flight; nobody imagines her daring to do that. Revati accompanies her serving as the Rescue from Without. She leaves for her choice



of detached existence, a real Master of both her inner and outer world, without any fear of censor, and with a freedom to live.

This analytical interpretation is a justification of Joseph Campbell's central point regarding myths, i.e., their power as a panacea for all the problems of an individual. This study emphasizes the import, significance, and workability of myths in today's modern, scientifically advanced, and technology based world, through the most potent medium, cinema. An ordinary person may not be able to decipher the meaning and apply it in his/her life but cinema can be the best link to join the world of wisdom i.e. Mythology, and the Contemporary society. Thus this research proves that modern cinema, with its performative power and cognitive potential for effect, can show modernity and tradition in harmony with each other, without doing violence to any. It can be used to support and sustain mythology but in revaluating ways which will then prove as both individually cathartic and socially progressive. Although the functional approach of mythology in films has been there in the past also, like in the movie *Kalyug* in the 1980s, yet, the last decade saw the peak of filmmakers' involvement in the cultural conversation. Cinema went from being entertainment to a creative art form as filmmakers have gained a scholarly authenticity and cultural currency. Filmamakers like Prakash Jha, Kalpna Lajmi, Shekhar Kapur, Deepa Mehta, Shyam Benegal, and many more young and upcoming directors have delved in cultural issues within their works.

With these findings at hand, it can be established that given their narrative familiarity and appeal, their fluid and flexible nature, the importation of the culturally embedded images like that of Ahilya, and any heroic persona, can be subtly exercised as to put them in a right frame fitting to the changing dynamics of human lives. Myths, with their presence in the unconscious lead a woman like Aditi (*Astitva*) to have a "harmonious, centered, and affirmative" life [9]. In depicting characters like her, the film maker has not gone off the mainstream realm of mythology's radar completely; rather he has inserted some improvisations.

In Aditi's case cinema plays the much needed role of filling the gap between the realm of mythic characters and the milieu of an ordinary person. The impossible and magical feats of the deified character of Ahilya has been made by cinema to be within the reach of a common woman. That's the wonder this moving and all-inclusive medium can do; as it is so much akin to reality, it makes that alien world, familiar.

Robert Oakes asserts "Films have the ability to touch the hearts and minds of viewers, and if used responsibly, it can carry the message of awareness and change to a global awareness." He says that a film maker "lifts the veil on a hidden plight", and according to the researcher, that's the key for them to

decipher our vast and complex mythology with the help of well researched scripts [10].

A Jungian psychological plus Campbell's mythological interpretation of films is sure to serve the purpose of mythology: Continuity and Stability, Guidelines for Living, Justify a Culture's Activities, Meaning to Life, Explain the Unexplainable, and Offer Role Models. Through films like this, the filmmakers can be the torchbearers for us with their self-created contemporary mythology where, if the concepts and standards represented in myths seem outmoded and remote, or have negative connotations to particular individuals, the same people can use the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical struggles depicted in movies to discuss and identify with their own experience in the world.

Both mythology and films have the "power of film to strengthen communities and improve lives" [11]. Filmmakers, being in a position to have a more effective vehicle to propagate ideas, can certainly re-vitalize the authority of myths and their archetypes in their films as well as human lives.

Robert A. Johnson in his writings impressively brings out the continuing relevance of the mythic heroes and heroines for the males and females of today. For example he, in the context of the West, views many men today being the wounded Fisher King, full of aches, anxieties, loneliness, unacknowledged etc. the cry of the helpless Handless Maiden is likened to the cry of a contemporary women who at times is made to feel useless excluding her role as a sexual object. He shows how men and women suffer differently and if understood in this manner, how communication on these lines can lessen many problems in relations. If these kind of mythological projections are tried in films in India as well, an individual can heal her/himself of so many psychological crisis in their lives which is full of stressful competition [12].

Any form of creative art can be a very effective media to bring about a change in the social outlook of people. Since ages, writings like songs and poetry which were infused with emotions, have been swayed and engaged emotions and have triggered changes even through revolutions. However, Cinema, owing to its audio-visual character can play a major role to this effect and its effect can prove to be very hard-hitting. The film makers, applying their own conscience and moral choices regarding the prevailing ill, can suggest ways to change through telling the story. If not a holistic change, Cinema at least can question.

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