

Facets of Ahalya in Hindu Mythology

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Abstract:

Mythopoeia is a recent genre that is inclusive of works on retelling of the traditional myths. Many popular Indian writers such as Amitav Ghosh, Devdutt Pattanaik, Kavita Kane, Anuja Chandramouli, Aswin Sanghi have indulged in this genre. Among these writers, Kavita Kane intends to serve as the voice for the silenced woman characters in Indian mythology. In the selected work, *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019), she has brought Ahalya, the silenced character to the limelight and has powerfully portrayed her voice and ideas. Ahalya is not just a part of the Ramayana, but has different faces in different facets of mythology. She is referred to in Jainism, Buddhism, Punjabi Folktales, in Upanishads and various Puranas. This paper aims at exploring facets of Ahalya in Hindu Mythology and also strives to trace various ways in which Ahalya has been portrayed in different ways.

Keywords: Sources, Mythology, Redemption, Modern renditions, Guilt

Introduction:

Indian English literature has many women writers writing on various themes like Arundhati Rao, Nayantara Sehgal, and Anita Desai. Mythopoeia is one interesting theme. There are many Indian writers involved in this genre such as Amitav Ghosh, Devdutt Pattanaik, Kavita Kane, Anuja Chandramouli, Aswin Sanghi etc. The word Mythology can be broken down into "mythos," and "-logy," that mean the study of folktales. The study of mythology is the study of a culture's sacred stories and fables. It covers many facets of the human experience. Myths serve as an expression of a culture's ideals and beliefs about people. In every civilization, it is essential. Mythopoeia is a retelling of the myths by changing its perspective or storyline in order to make it more powerful and creative.

Kane is well-known for her books *Sita's Sister* (2014), *Karna's Wife* (2014), *Menaka's Choice* (2015), *Lanka's Princess* (2017), *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* (2017), and *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019). Ahalya, one of the panchakanyas revered in Indian mythology, is the subject of the enlightened feminist retelling *Ahalya's Awakening*. In a culture that reduces female identity to body and conventional gender obligations, Kavita Kane has been a gamechanger in the field of mythological retelling. Her ability to remain detached from patriarchal concerns while still humanising the victims among them elevates the moral quandaries that characterise human suffering.

Notable amount of research done in Kane's works in different areas such as feminism, woebegone marriages, psychological analysis, the trope of journey, perspective writing, subversive journey of a woman. The source of the novel is a bit unexplored as the major focus lies on the content and the way that it is delivered.

Sources of Ahalya:

There are varied sources in mythology referring to Ahalya such as *Bala Kanda Ramayana*, *Brahma Purana* and the *Vishnu Dharmottara Purana*, *Bhagavata Purana*, Tribal references like *Bhil Ramayana*, *Tulasidas's Ramayana*, *Bhagavata Purana*, *Harivamsa*, *Padma Purana*, *Linga Purana*, *Skanda Purana*, *Brahma vaivarta Purana*, *Ananda Ramayana*, *Kamba Ramayana*, *Adhyatma Ramayana* and *Krittivasa Ramayana* and *Katha sarit sagara*, References in Jainism, and Punjabi folktale. The above-mentioned sources mention different versions of her life, there are major differences in the reference to creation and birth, marriage, encounter with Indra, punishment, and curse and redemption.

Creation and birth:

Out of the sources described below, a few refer to Ahalya as born and others cite that she is created. Her birth is described as *ayonijasambhava*, a supernatural birth. In *Bala Kanda Ramayana*, *The Brahma Purana* and the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, it is described that Brahma moulded her with complete creative energy. In Mahiri dance tradition it is specified that Brahma created Ahalya out of water in order to break the pride of Urvashi, who considered herself as the most beautiful nymph (Roy, 2022). The tribal *Bhil Ramayana* describes Ahalya as created from the ashes of the sacrificial fire of the Saptarishis and is gifted to Sage Gautama. All the above-mentioned sources mention that Ahalya was created whereas *Harivamsa* and *Bhagavata Purana* describes her as a human and states that she was born as a princess of the Puru dynasty. Kane's version of Ahalya's birth in *Ahalya's awakening* is based on *Harivamsa* and *Bhagavata Purana* that she refers to Ahalya as the princess of the Puru dynasty, the daughter of Mudgal and Nalayini and the sister of Divodas.

Marriage:

Like her birth, Ahalya's marriage also has many versions. In Chapter 41 of the Valmiki Uttara Kanda of the *Ramayana*, it is stated that, Ahalya after creation was handed over to Gautama by Brahma and was asked to take care until she matures. When Ahalya attained maturity, Gautama handed over Ahalya to Brahma, Brahma was fascinated by his spirit of asceticism and wanted Gautama to marry Ahalya. But Indra thinks that all the beautiful women are meant for him and was completely against Ahalya marrying an ascetic.

In *Brahma Purana* and *Padma purana* it is specified that Ahalya's marriage was determined through an open contest. Brahma announced a contest that the one who circumambulates the heaven, earth and the underworld at once will win the hands of Ahalya. Indra immediately used all his magical powers, completed the

task and claimed Ahalya to Brahma but then, Narada pGautama completed the task even before Indra unintentionally. As a part of his daily rituals, he circumambulates the wish granting cow Surabhi while she gave birth. It is mentioned in *the vedas* especially Adharvana veda that if one circumambulates a cow that gives birth it is equivalent to going round the three worlds. Brahma then marries her to Gautama. In Kane's version one can spot that Ahalya seeks refuge in Gautama's Ashram during the war years and fell in love with him but her love for him goes unrequited and it is through this open contest, Gautama wins Ahalya's hand.

There are also deviations in the sources when it comes to her marriage life. The initial difference is the location of Gautam's Ashram, the *Ramayana* records Gautama's Ashram as in the forest near Mithila and that is called Mithila Upavana. Many other sources refer to the location near a river like *Brahma purana* spots it near the river Godavari and *Skanda Purana* near the river Narmada. The *Padma Purana* and the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* describes the hermitage as the one located near the holy city of Pushkar.

Relationship between Indra and Ahalya:

There is a major part in the vedas especially when it comes to sacrifice called 'Subhramanya formula'. (Feller, 2004, p. 131) The word Subramanya refers to the real Brahman. Towards the beginning of any sacrifice, it is the custom to repeat "Subramanyom" thrice. After this, Indra is addressed as the lover of Ahalya that is:

"Come, Indra ! come owner of the yellow horses !

Ram of Medhatithi ! Men of Vrishanas'va ! thou bufiilo (gaura)

who ascendest the female avaskandin lover of Ahalya ! son of

"* Kusika ! Brahmana ! son of Gotama !" ("Subrahmanya formula Agnishtoma an orgy?," 2016)

Other Puranas like The *Jaiminiya Brahmana* and the *Sadvimsha Brahmana* from the *SamaVeda* tradition, the *Shatapatha Brahmana* and the *Taittiriya Brahmana* from the *Yajurveda* tradition and two *Shrautasutras* (Latyayana and Drahyayana) describe Indra as , " Lover of Ahalya ... O Kaushika [Brahmin], who calls himself Gautama"(Feller, 2004, p. 132). Samaveda describes Ahalya as Maitreyi, the daughter of the God Mitra. In some puranas like *subrahmanya* formula and The *Sadvimsha Brahmana* does not make any explicit references about Ahalya's husband. There are other versions that make out the way Indra encountered Ahalya like he was the friend of her brother Divodas and even her brother was interested in Ahalya marrying Indra. Although Indra was completely disinterested, Indra kept on going behind her.

Crime, Punishment and redemption:

In *Balakanda Ramayana* it is specified that Indra after knowing the absence of Gautama went to the Ashram in his disguise and tried to seduce Ahalya. There are a few who believe that Ahalya accepted him inspite of finding out that he is in disguise of Gautama owing to her curiosity and the other few say it is because she was very proud of her beauty. ("Expiation of Sin," 2010) There is a slight deviation between *Balakanda Ramayana* and *Katha Sarit Sagara* that is in the latter Indra was not in disguise.

There are differences in the *Uttara Kanda Ramayana* that it portrays Ahalya as the guiltless one, there are also references in *Mahabaratha* as if Nahula, the fourth of the Paandavas reminds Brihaspati, the Guru of Indra, the way Indra violated Ahalya. These two versions reiterate the fact that Ahalya was guiltless. Various Puranas such as *Padma Purana*, *Brahma Purana* and *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* also reverberate the fact that Ahalya is guiltless and it was Indra who took the form of a cock, fake moon to deceive Gautama and seduce Ahalya.

In *Skanda Purana*, it is referred that Ahalya identifies that it was Indra by the celestial fragrance and it is also stated in chapter 18 of the Kamban's 12th Century Tamil adaptation of the *Ramayana*, the *Ramavataram* states that even after knowing Indra's disguise she accepted him.

In Venkata Krishnappa Nayaka's Telugu rendition, it is mentioned that Ahalya and Indra loved each other even before her marriage. Since Brahma offered Ahalya to Gautama, they both were upset but still it is mentioned that they continue their relationship.

There are various versions referring to her punishment such as *Bala Kanda Ramayana* in which Gautama curses Indra to be castrated and Ahalya to remain invisible for thousand years suffer in air tormented by her guilt. He also suggests a redemption that she will be back to the original form once she extends a good hospitality to lord Rama.

Ahalya is described as "Mahabhaga" by both Viswamitra and Ramabadracharya. Where the former interprets that as the ideal and illustrious and the latter interprets as the most unfortunate (Monier-Williams, 1832). In Mahabharata, it is stated that Indra is cursed to have a golden beard and in *Uttara Kanda Ramayana* it is mentioned that Indra loses his throne and Ahalya loses her beauty as it was the sole reason for her seduction.

Brahma Purana elicits a different version excluding Rama from the narrative, that Gautama curses Ahalya to become a dried up river, who then is awaken to life after merging with the river Gautami. In *Padma Purana*, there is a deviation in the episode of seduction, that when Indra tries to escape in the form of a cat, he is cursed by Gautama to have vulvae all over his body and Ahalya to become

a mere dried up skeleton with a condition to revive back to life when Rama laughs at her condition. Almost all the versions referred to so far state that Gautama cursed both Indra and Ahalya, whereas certain others like Pudhumaipithan's Ahalya state that Gautama accepted Ahalya's plea as she has taken up the vow of chastity.

Children:

There are also deviations when it comes to Ahalya's children. The *Ramayana* makes a mention of Ahalya's son named Shatanand who later on becomes the family priest of King Janaka. *Mahabharata* has a reference to Ahalya's two sons Sharadvan and Chirakari and an unnamed daughter. *Vamana Purana* states that Ahalya had three daughters namely Jaya, Jayanti and Aparaji. There are other famous legends in Hindu Mythology that state Vali (the son of Aruni and Indra) and Sugriva (the son of Aruni and Surya) are given to Ahalya. As Gautama disliked them, he cursed them to become monkeys thus they became *Vanaras*. It is also said that Ahalya had a daughter by name Anjani and it was she who disclosed the secret of Vali and Sugriva to Gautama that Ahalya cursed her to give birth to a monkey. It was this Anjana who delivered Hanuman.

Other deviations:

The fifth chapter of *Bala Kanda Ramayana*, *Adhayatma Ramayana*, is dedicated to Ahalya where it is mentioned that Ahalya is turned to stone and is advised to meditate Lord Rama, once she meets Lord Rama, he revives her from the curse and she sings a panegyric song which becomes the ideal song to praise Rama.

There is a significant reference to Ahalya in *Ramacharitamansa* by Tulasidas that he lauds Lord Rama as *Tribhangi* which means the destroyer of the three. It is said that Rama destroyed Ahalya's sin by sight, curse by the dust of his foot and affliction by the touch of his foot. Swami Ramabhadracharya in *Ahalyoddhara* states that the same *Tribhangi* is used as the metre in Ahalya's Panegyric.

There are also different versions that straight way describes the curse in one version of *Mahabharata*, it is stated that Gautama orders his son Chirakari to behead Ahalya after getting to know her relationship with Indra but Chirakari doesn't do that as he was very close to his mother and Gautama realised that he was wrong after realising that the entire mistake was on Indra. In the *Bhil Ramayana*, it is stated that, Indra comes out of his imprisonment after making a promise that he will shower rains regularly and will ensure one quarter of crops to be dedicated to Gautama. And Ahalya in this version, becomes a dried land waiting for Indra's shower that is tamed by Gautama in the form of cyclone.

There are various modern renditions that bring out the voice of Ahalya such as *Ahalyamoksham*, an eighteenth century play by Kunchan Nambiar. There are

works like Pudhumaipithan's *Sapavimocanam* ("Deliverance from the Curse") (1943) and K. B. Sreedevi's Malayalam work (1990) translated as "Woman of Stone" written in a feminist perspective. Critics like Kovai Gnani, in the poem *Kallihai*, describes Ahalya as the representation of the oppressed class and Rama as a representation of ideal future without exploitation. He also portrays Gautama and Indra as the ones representing feudalism and capitalism respectively. There are also references to Ahalya in the Hindu customs and tradition that it is said that Ahalya remains as the black grinding stone and the bride is asked to step on that so that she promises not to be like Ahalya. The same Ahalya is also celebrated that the spot in which she did penance is called Ahalya-tirtha. It is widely believed that if one bathes in that will be completely purified.

Conclusion:

Kavita Kane has carefully referred to almost all the sources available that we can find her version a blend of many versions specified above. She has crafted her novel in such a mythopoetical fashion that it brings out the voice of the silenced Ahalya in all possible ways.

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