

Ahalya: The Retold Narrative of the Cursed Metamorphosis of an Unblemished Innocence

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Abstract:

Any piece of creative art; be it literature, poetry or painting assiduously eulogises the eternal subject position of the powerful males; whereas females remain at the backdrop as vague shadows or as the balancing consorts for flourishing lustre. Myths or epics are no exceptions to this prevalent trend. Women, too seem to have accepted this long patronisation without much debilitating contort. But the Postmodern narration of the old myths questions the very base of this uneven weaving and it also endeavours to recreate old stories into new mould. Kavita Kane, a renowned journalist and creative artist, has deliberately utilised those muted shadows from our magnificent epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata; and tried to narrate them with their personal account of unrequited passion and socio-political exploitation of unfathomable sufferings. Ahalya's Awakening is the hapless story of the princess of Kampilya, whose zeal for education, scholasticism and perseverance for being a 'rishika' rather than a mere sexual partner of her husband, Rishi Goutam, shocks everyone with her defiant rumination and intellectual succour. Yet, she was turned into stone for Indra's carnal seduction in the disguise of her husband. Her own story remained unheard, unsung and unreciprocated. She was back to the living form with the miraculous touches of King Rama; and renounces her husband for his undue curse. This novel, innovatively questions at the root of the patriarchal dynamics and interrogates into the principles of 'Nyay'(Justice) and 'Dharma' (Righteousness) according to parochial male supremacy. My endeavour in this paper, therefore, is to find justification in Ahalya's narrative and to reflect on her enigmatic mortification with palpable care and excruciating diligence.

Keywords: Gender, myth, mythopoesis, patriarchy, periphery etc.

Introduction:

Myths are invariably the stories of the unforgettable past sublimated through spoken or written narratives through generations leading to a corporeal or apotheosised society vexed with social chastisement and political perturbations. Myth, in every literature, is considered to be a codified norm providing ethical and moral assistance consolidated by culture, tradition, religion and ideological discourses. At the heart of those epics, there are some definite injustice fallen to the women, and the unmitigated *hamartia* and *hubris* of the heroic deeds causing drastic catastrophe at the end. Myth valorises war, valiant heroes, ennobled suffering of the heroines and denigrated catastrophe of villains who ultimately get punished at the end. Thus, morally they elevate us from good to noble, earth to ethereal, sublime to majestic. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, two renowned epics of Hindu mythology has been inoculated in our psyche since our birth and we have been

brought up knowing the idealism of King Ram, dutifulness of Sita, enmity between Padavas and Kauravas, Draupadi's humiliation in the public court and so on. But quite unfortunately, the patriarchal gaze has never recognized the significance of the minor females and cast them away as shadowy figures. Writers like Amish Tripathy, Aswin Sanghai, Chitra Banerjee, Durjay Dutt and Kavita Kane have deliberately insinuated into those indistinct margins and endeavoured to portray the tales from an alternative narrative. Retelling of stories suggests a sense of re-visioning or re-creating the texts from some other point of view breaking through all stereotypical orthodoxy. Kane, in her latest venture; *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) has depicted the Ahalya's journey from innocence to experience, from her exquisite childhood to her deplorable curse; in short the text recapitulates her desire, her suffering and her disgust for the male folk which we otherwise overlook. She finds a mere entry in *Ramayana*; in the Bala Kanda; where she comes alive with Rama's miraculous touches. But her previous life or the senility of the aftermath remains unexplored. Thus, Kane's narrative seems to fulfil her inner desire of speaking loud; of telling out the world about the haplessness of the females reigning since time immemorial. Like Uruvi, in *Karna's Wife*; she emerges with bold individuality and keen intelligence; a woman who obliterated every obstacle in her surrounding to marry Rishi Goutam by wilfully succumbing to the stature of an outcaste's wife and anchoring his life with new orchestration; but ultimately fails in her quest of emancipation for the burning zeal of jealousy of her own husband. Finally, the curse completes the circle; she was turned into lifeless stone as atonement for her pungent desire; her innocence castigated with impenetrable turbulence for the misdemeanour of Lord Indra; and she remained notoriously disgraceful as an adulterous wife of the sagacious Goutam.

Kavita Kane:

Born in Mumbai, in 1966 and being brought up in Patna, Delhi and Pune; Kane has successfully started her career as a Journalist. Completed her Masters from Pune University, she chose to indulge in writing, and Journalism seemed to her as the best pragmatic platform to flourish. After bestowing twenty long years in various media houses like *Magna Publications*, *Daily News and Analysis* and *The Times of India* she took up writing as an ardent enchantment. After the debut success of her first novel, *Karna's Wife: An Outcaste's Queen*, she quits the job of the journalist and passionately devours herself in writing novels. She has developed a unique genre of writing fiction; *mythopoeia*, or recreating or remoulding old myths with new perspectives. All her novels like *The Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013), *Sita's Sister* (2014) *Menaka's Choice* (2015), *Lanka's Princess* (2017), *The FisherQueen's Dynasty* (2017) and the latest one, *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) are dealing with not so exposed minor characters from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* unlike Sita, Kunti or Draupadi; rather she has chosen Uruvi, Urmila, Menaka, Surpanakha, Satyavati and Ahalya respectively; who in the original epics have been denigrated to the periphery for their lack of individuality to speak their hearts out. But, the tragedy of those females attracted the inquisitive zeal of Kane so much so that she took up the laborious ardour to portray these characters with contemporary socio-political theorem where those otherwise muted characters provide a newer dimension to the original epic which was neglected by the male originators. My concern in this chapter is to analyse the rearmost novel of Kane, *Ahalya's Awakening* with a contemporary humanitarian stand-view that delineates the struggle, misdemeanour and humiliation, Ahalya, the female protagonist has undergone; first as a wife who had to continuously struggle with her domestic chores with four children and a large

ashram, and secondly for her exasperated desire of being loved, wished and respected which led her to the ultimate doom alike Indra. Goutam's character too, withstands a flashing metamorphosis which could also be held responsible for their mutual incompatibility paving the way for her final disaster. In an interview with Aparna Narrain for *The Hindu*, Kane confesses that:

The book deals with relationships and the relationship between husband and wife, and of course, the aspect of infidelity and the related story. It's also about our role in passing judgement as a society; how, especially as women, we are so easily condemned by other people.

It's such a tiny episode but it somehow has a huge impact. If you see the entire incident, it is a sort of precursor to what happens to Sita years later. Rama, who is supposed to liberate Ahalya, is the same person Sita confronts for her agnipariksha. So, in that way, Ahalya is very intriguing.

Secondly, in the other tellings of her story, she doesn't talk at all; she is like a mute spectator to her own tragedy. And there are so many versions of this story; it's amazing how her character has morphed from a devoted wife to an adulterous wife. But again, we revere her as one of the panchakanya. That is the paradox. [<https://www.thehindu.com/books/books-authors/i-am-not-sitting-in-judgement-of-the-main-characters-kavita-kane/article29690910.ece>]

Discussion:

The text begins with a prologue, where the present Indra, King Nahusha grieves for Sachi, the former wife of the previous Indra; and Menaka dissuades him from the imminent doom by narrating the pathetic transformations of Ahalya and Indra. Ahalya, who was born to break the vanity of Urvashi by the own hands of Prajapati Bramha, was turned into stone; and Indra has been cursed "to have a thousand vulvas all over his body and to lose his testicles" (Kane 03). The entire episode therefore, was narrated by Menaka with her omniscient perspective and transparent clarity.

Ahalya, 'the beautiful one without blemishes' (Kane 08) was born along with her twin brother Divodas and was very close to her parents: King Mudgal and Queen Nalayani. From her very childhood, she was keen about acquiring cognizance and scholastic perception. Marriage was never a cherishing occasion for her; and she wanted to excel in all academic domains: "I can't remain in the palace and acquire the knowledge of the world. I don't want to be some cloistered princess who just looks pretty and does nothing" (Kane 22). She believes that beauty can never be her lurking achievement, and she should not idle away her precious time without employing her brain into studying. Divodas too, assured the anxious mother about her brilliance in scholastic pursuits: "Ma, let her study... She's a brilliant student. And if I have excelled as a warrior, why can she not study what she wants?" (Kane 29). Indra, the friend and supporter of Divodas in battling against king Shamber; was heartily invited to the palace of Kampilya; and the moment he saw Ahalya; he felt the rushing desire of flesh burning inside. But she never indulges any provocation, nor did she offer him any consoling promises; her reply was modest as well as sharp like the modern feminists: "Does marriage always validate a woman? Or her future" (Kane 39); and rather snubs him for considering them, "objects of beauty and desire and not as women, as people engaged in specific occupations" (Kane 39). The more she avoided his presence; he grew vicious and lascivious for her virgin splendour and dynamic physique. Her sharp queries of the subject position of women met embalmed comfort from Goutam, who not only did respect the fair sex but also was preparing laws for their

benefits. She was enamoured by his humble speculation and sharp wit: “Women have been made weak, their strength undermined if not underestimated” (Kane 84). She firmly posits her demand of being a rishika like Lopamudra or Ghosha Kakshivati or Ratri Varadwaj renouncing the life of the princess; and longs for continuing her studies in Goutam’s austere hermitage; she feels to be enlightened under his shelter, by acquiring knowledge and experience for ulterior gain. She feels “resurrected, rejuvenated...resuscitated” (Kane 102), being reborn with sublime faculties. She repudiates the ceremonious Swayamver where she was to be presented just as a trophy to the winner of some senseless contest and felt that in due course of learning, she has already lost her heart to Goutam and Gautam too, realised the same barrenness in his heart without her phenomenal presence. She was finally won by Rishi Gautam, fulfilling the condition of travelling three worlds by innocuously performing the task of ‘circumambulating the birthing cow’ (Kane 133) denoting three elements of destinations: movement, magnitude and motivation; which aggravate the haughty Indra who initially reciprocates to Sachi’s love for temporal relief; but promises to avenge later for his undeserving betrayal with virulent resentment.

Ahalya’s married life undergoes an astonishing change where she has to look after the ashram, take care of her four children; and things got more complicated when Goutam stopped teaching and making love with her. His penchant for becoming a ‘Maharshi’ has made him fatally indifferent about the family life and Ahalya yelled for dying within devoid of love and care. Thus, from her fervent desire of learning has been denigrated to the role of an uncomplaining mother to the children as well as to the ashram people. Her placid beauty remained un-nurtured; her fatigue overpowered her desires and their conjugal acquaintance seemed to have submerged by dormant passivity. She exclaims: “Is this life? Oh, one can’t go on living like this, one can’t. Oh, it’s madness, wickedness, not life. To live with one who smiles at me, yet feels so much contempt. I feel so burdensome, so ridiculous in his eyes! Oh, how humiliating!” (Kane 274) Indra, took up this reverent opportunity with diligent care, he appeals with earnest plea, and Ahalya finally complies with placid resignation: “She communicated her excitement to him, lavishly, deeply, with small, tentative kisses that were not just a promise but a fulfilment. Each enflamed him, each touch scorching him with a pleasurable fire, melting her against him...kisses that were bounteous, craving a fiery want by holding back nothing at all” (Kane 311). But Goutam immediately perceives this treachery; and furiously curses Indra of covering his body with thousand female genitals torturing every time for his connive conspiracy against his innocent wife; Ahalya too understood her guilt and blatantly waits for her turn to come. She accepts with contrite penitence: “My desire were my need, my right to my sanity, my satiation, my self-actualisation, possibly even my freedom, my last defiant show of individuality” (Kane 327). She felt both of them have metamorphoses into new beings in their old bodies; and unless she can control her wavering mind about the distracted notion of love and marriage; she cannot be elevated to the status of a rishika; and therefore she felt the need of purgation from her previous flaws, accepting the curse with muted docility: “May you remain invisible to the human eye but visible in your mind’s eye, surviving on air and lying in ashes till the time you receive your blessing, your enlightenment...In the quest you shall receive your salvation –the deliverance you searched for so long all these years” (Kane 328).

Henceforth, a drastic change has happened almost imperceptibly; her children was removed away from her care, Goutam deserted her to her own sorrows, and her very desire for education and

knowledge remained unfulfilled like her physical yearnings; the momentary weakness leading to her great fall for the exploitation of two males in her life, Goutam in his righteousness and Indra in his fanatical lust. Her meeting with Sita in the Epilogue has exerted out her suppressed regret for the humiliation she suffered. She sympathises with Sita, who too was deserted by her 'righteous' husband for no shameful liaison; she asserts that the world defines a woman to be born as a daughter, to live as a wife and to die as a mother; there is no way to step out of that intricate perimeter; and often they have to pay atonement for others transgression; she nullifies Sita's weak defence of her husband by arguing: "Wars have been fought for land and greed and pride and egos, but most of all, fought over the bodies of women, in the name of the "honour" of their women...Societal expectations are hypocritical, dear. They enjoy a woman being subjugated, subjecting her to a moral trial. And they lament her "fall" from the lofty pinnacle of female virtue, her projected chastity and fidelity. It was your chastity that was questioned and my fidelity. But what makes yours worse is that you were innocent, Sita. I was not" (Kane 344). In fact, the same Ram has revoked Ahalya's life, commits the same mistake of deserting his pregnant wives with no fault; and Sita's banishment therefore can well be called another succession of man's oppression demeanour on this enfeebled second gender. Ahalya announces the redemption was her own choice, alike the mistake and her renouncement of Goutam bears witness of her broken trust and hurt pride. She accepts calmly that she and Goutam were not made for each other and she seeks no refuge to shelter or reciprocate her love; her redemption and self-realisation is complete with her ultimate voicing out: "I fought, I struggled, I obeyed, I compromised, I rebelled, I surrendered, but above all, and at last, I think I found myself. I found the truth that is *me*. I lived the life given to me as a woman with all honesty, true to my instincts and faithful to my impulses, eager and yearning, but always true to *myself*. Always" (Kane 349). Thus, her ultimate emancipation as a woman of free will and dignified disposition reminds us of the new womanhood Beauvoir states about; the females with nonchalant jurisdiction, valiant resoluteness and lofty wisdom: "The system based on her dependence collapses as soon as she ceases to be a parasite; there is no longer need for a masculine mediator between her and the universe...she affirms herself concretely as subject in her projects; she senses her responsibility relative to the goals she pursues and to the money and rights she appropriates" (Beauvoir 737).

Conclusion:

Northrop Frye has rightly observed, "Myth thus provides the main outlines and the circumference of a verbal universe which is later occupied by literature as well. Literature is more flexible than myth, and fills up this universe more completely: a poet or novelist may work in areas of human life apparently remote from the shadowy gods and gigantic story-outlines of mythology. But in all cultures mythology merges insensibly into, and with literature". (Frye 600) In the original tale of *Ramayana*; Ahalya finds a mere entry in Rama's valiant fortitude, where he offers salvage to a damned soul. In the original adaptation, Ahalya was innocent, and the lecherous Indra had violated her modesty in the disguise of Rishi Goutam; and she was cursed into stone though no treacherous part had been plotted by her. But in the retold narrative, she was not at all duped; she allowed Indra consensually to make love to her, to atone for the incomplete carnal commiseration her husband lost interest in. Thus, she was doubly marginalised by the patriarchal supremacy, first by being the wife of Rishi Goutam; and secondly by the societal condemnation of violating the legacy of the submissive wife by proving herself adulterous. This re-written take on a small episode in *Ramayana*,

therefore obviously compliances it with fervid opportunities by analysing it with contemporary outlook; at the same time it manifests the traumatized yearnings manifold with deep regrets, the dreams of love and coherence devoid of hatred, enmity and mischief as a saga of voiceless infernal persecutions.

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