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Beyond the Curse: Mapping Epistemic Agency and Spiritual Interiority in Kavita Kané's Ahalya's Awakening

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the life of a woman, the wonderful creation of Lord Brahma, and the doting wife of a great Rishi; however, she has been cursed by her husband to remain invisible to all beings for thousands of years and will be liberated and redeemed by the touch of Shri Ram. Her name is Ahalya; she is not well described in Hindu mythology; however, she is known for her moral transgression. Moreover, the dichotomous situation is that she has become the symbol of female chastity and has been extolled as the Panchakanya (the five iconic women from the Hindu Epics), which struck a chord with Kavita Kané, bringing her onto the dais and humanising her as a contemporary woman. The objective of this research is to explore Ahalya's attitudinal shift, which transforms her blemished image from that of a condemned adulteress into a pious, independent woman. This research examines how Ahalya asserts her individuality in a patriarchal world, turns her curse into a boon, and ultimately finds her salvation.

Keywords: *Moral transgression, Panchakanya, Attitudinal shift, Curse, Salvation..*

Ahalya is not an unheard-of woman, but a lesser-known character of the Hindu epic The Ramayana. There are two extremes, paradoxical identities associated with Ahalya's personality; one is the condemned adulteress, and the other is a revered figure of the Hindu religion. Now, the question arises: why is she still considered a reverential or pious figure when she is a certified adulteress? In every version, Ahalya's story is described from a different angle, but her deliverance by Ram is the same. Though she is placed on a pedestal as a revered figure, she is, helplessly, a silent spectator to her own tragedy while everyone judges her. Kané attempts to answer the most pressing questions about her identity: who Ahalya really is, why she has ambition or desire, and what she wants. In one of her interviews with NIE, Kavita Kané unfolds her intention to re-create Ahalya:

We often don't view her story through society's perspective. Ahalya is a silent witness of her own tragedy: she doesn't utter a word of protest or explanation for both her curse and subsequent liberation from the curse. Her silence screams of her importance, her helplessness, guilt, and a plea for justice. No one seems to be interested in listening but condemning her. In Ahalya's Awakening, it is her voice we hear, it is her perspective we see (NIE, Nov. 2019).

Ahalya is the key figure of Kané's narration, where the author provides a fresh perspective to the reader and presents her as a contemporary Indian woman who justifies her thoughts and

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actions. Etymologically, Ahalya means "one with an impeccable beauty," and its literal meaning in the Sanskrit dictionary is "unploughed." As Lord Brahma mentions it in Uttara Kanda of Ramayana, "Ahalya, "Hala" meaning ugly, from which "Hala" is derived, and she in whom "Halya" does not appear is named Ahalya; this was the name I called her" (Shastri, H.P. Uttara Kanda Chapter XXX). Moreover, Ahalya is also called ayonijasambhava, 'the one not born of a woman'. She is a revered figure in Hindu scriptures. She is placed at the head of the Panchkanya, but in modern retellings, what intrigues me most is the way authors dramatise Ahalya's figure in the Indian text, presenting her role under a double standard.

Beyond the archetypal narration, Kané redefines Ahalya's identity as a common human being, born the daughter of King Mudgal and Queen Nalayani and christened by Guru Vashisht (on Lord Brahma's suggestion). Ahalya is the only princess of Panchal and the twin sister of Prince Divodas. She has been an ardent learner since childhood and is inquisitive about the world, so she eagerly asks her guru, "Why is the earth called a mother and not a father?" Her question astonished people; a mere ten-year-old girl inquired about the philosophy of earth. At the age of two, she speaks complete sentences smoothly, and by her sixth birthday, she learns the basics of grammar. Her adaptable skills make her father curious to ask her, "When did you learn that lesson, Ahalya?... Tell us how you did it? And is surprised to hear her say, "Once I heard the words in my head, the lesson was easy" (Ahalya's Awakening, 12). Moreover, she knows the Vedas and the Puranas, and is also aware of politics and philosophy. After graduating in arithmetic, writing, and the basics of the Vedas, she wants to pursue higher education at the ashram. Although her father believes in gender neutralisation and agrees to send her to the ashram, even Rishi Vashisth is also ready to teach her in his ashram, but her mother is not in favour of girls' higher education; rather, she wants her to be married to a suitable king like Indra. She says rigorously, "No, you don't need to, Ahalya; your formal education is done. You don't need to continue studying. You turned sixteen last month, and you need to get married" (28). But "she wishes to seek knowledge rather, and be a 'rishika' rather than marry a king and be his queen" (Rev. 5 Aug. 2020). She thinks that beauty is just a part of personality; it cannot define a woman as a whole. Debalina Sengupta traces her personality, "She believes that beauty can never be her lurking achievement, and she should not idle away her precious time without employing her brain in studying" (TOJQI). As we know, women's education plays a vital role in developing the next generation; however, they have not been given equal opportunities to develop their innate potential like men. However, through the character of Queen Nalayani, the author meticulously shows the way patriarchal norms are instilled in women's minds over time, which affects the lives of other women. Here, the irony is that a mother is more fascinated by her daughter's beauty rather than her brain and forces her to follow the societal norms, bounds her in the name of safety and tradition;

therefore, allows her to go out of the palace, not for her studies but rather just for her protection from her enemies. As Rishi Gautam discloses, her education is just a pretext to keep her away from the enemies and the palace. His ashram is only a sanctuary for her.

Kané carves out Ahalya's passion for obtaining knowledge. She is thrilled to be the disciple of Rishi Gautam and to resume her studies in the ashram, though he disagrees to accept her as his disciple, but she cannot miss the opportunity to dive into the new world of enlightenment; therefore, from the very first day, she follows the daily routine of the ashram. Though Ahalya is sent to the ashram in the name of protection, she utilises her time and learns many things through her willpower. She knows that her guru is working on women's law and asks him eagerly, "Do women need special law?... You think women are weak, is that why you are outlining new laws for them?" (83). Now the question arises, why don't men ever need it? He is amazed to see her sharp queries about women's position in society, so he replies to her calmly:

> I am interested in the rules that should govern us, men and women, as individuals in society. For that, we need laws. Laws are meant to protect and serve justice to the weak; he adds further, 'they are not weak; women have been made weak, their strength undermined if not underestimated...This is why we need laws to empower them' (83-84).

Ahalya's marriage is another remarkable incident mentioned in the original text of the Ramayana's 'Uttara Kanda', in which Lord Brahma himself places Ahalya under the care of Rishi Gautam until she reaches puberty. Then, impressed by Gautam's prurient restraint, he (Brahma) decides to wed her to him. He (Brahma) acknowledges:

> I placed her under the protection of the magnanimous Gautama, and he, having cared for her for many years, returned her to me. Thereupon, having tested the absolute self-control of that illustrious ascetic and recognising the height of his austerity, I gave her to him in wedlock (Shastri, Uttara Kanda Chapter XXX).

Generally, in traditional Indian society, a woman has been defined solely by a man's authority. She has no choice but to follow a man who is head of the family, initially by her father, then her husband, and again by her sons. P. Raja admits the facts in his short story Ahalya's Curse and says, "Such a thing happens to ninety per cent of women in our country. It is destined so perhaps. Or is it a curse on our motherland?" (Manushi). Similarly, in this novel, Ahalya's mother also follows the social order by fixing her marriage to a man without her consent. They organised a grand Swayamvara for her marriage, but is it truly a Swayamvara? It contains two words, svayaṁ and vara, the first means self, and the latter means groom, meaning thereby that 'a woman selects a man as her partner from a group of suitors'. Still, here, it's hardly a swayamvar for her, because her family has already fixed her marriage. She

is presented here as a trophy to the winner; therefore, ask her mother dauntlessly, "Why this sham of a swayamwar, Ma?... If you have decided on Indra as my husband, then why the charade of me choosing some suitor?" (111). She also questions her father, "You decided my swayamwar without letting me know?" (114). Her raising questions gives a voice to contemporary women living in traditional families. Women are still facing marriage pressure, and for that, they are not allowed to follow their dreams. Here, Ahalya is in the same boat; her mother wants her to be trained in domestic life and therefore does not allow her to go beyond the social order. However, she overcame that pressure by breaking the social threshold and making her choice: Rishi Gautam, a seer, over Indra, a king, and knowledge over royal comfort. Krishna Chatur Sow Mondal observes Ahalya and said, "Like any brave warrior, Ahalya is ready to accept the consequences of her decisions. Her struggle symbolises strength and resilience, a much-needed quality to counter the patriarchal society" (Literary Voice, Mar. 2022).

As we know, Ahalya's intellectual journey began before marriage, while living in the Ashram of Rishi Gautam. Still, after marrying the same man, her journey took a drastic turn for the worse. As time passes, she feels betrayed because she is more passionate about her studies; she quickly finishes her chores and learns her lesson in time. Still, Gautam spends most of his time working on the Dharma Sutra, travelling all over the country and establishing new gurukuls, and his promise to teach her, to guide her, to groom her as a rishika has been drastically washed away. He is not interested in teaching her and, just like other typical husbands suggest, "You require the rest now that there are four children to look after" (245). From here, this is the first awakening of Ahalya's self-exploration. She rejects the male supremacy in the education system, designs her own library, and never asks him again. Ahalya's next bout of despondency is evident when her marital relationship undergoes a drastic change: she is forced to remain at the ashram to do housework, care for her children, and manage the ashram. At the same time, Gautam is busy with his new grammatical structure and new students. His ambition to become a 'Maharshi' makes him indifferent towards his family. She keeps waiting for him over the days or weeks, but he hardly comes, and whenever he comes, he joins the bed late at night and leaves the ashram early in the morning. He started ignoring her, and whenever she tries to convince him, he annoys her, saying, "Don't be a typical complaining wife!" (222). Gradually, she realises a strange barrenness in their relationship; her complaints are futile to him, so she finds a new way to soothe herself in the face of life's absurdity: she goes for an evening walk, sits on a rock, then comes home and resumes her daily chores. Now, she decided to remain silent in her world and give importance to her drive, her desire, and her ambition. "Both of them failed each other miserably, and this creates a void in their relationship" (Literary Voice, Mar. 2022).

Kané examines Ahalya's state of mind, moulds her personality in a new direction, leads her life from a chaste woman to infidelity, and transforms her completely, humanising her as "a normal woman with normal needs". She is shown as completely devoted to her husband, her family, and the ashram, but when her husband repeatedly ignores her, she withdraws from him. Indra, obsessed with her beauty and charming figure, takes advantage of it and seizes an opportunity to make space for himself. He follows her and notices her prolonged loneliness and longings; therefore, when Rishi Gautam went to his morning prayer, he disguises himself as Gautam and becomes intimate with Ahalya. Though she identifies his touch, still thinking that "he isn't Indra. He is Gautam, she has hoped for and wanted and loved". Meanwhile, Gautam's voice breaks the silence, and she comes back to her senses. She admits her transgression and is ready to face the consequences, so she asks him for punishment, "Punish me, Gautam, like you do your students when they err? The punishment you think would give me my redemption?" (322). Ahalya recalls the time when they talked about women's sexuality, and Gautam advocated the woman's desire, saying that a woman could follow the path of polyandry. She asks him now if he can perceive the anguish of Rishi Veda's wife and Rishi Agasty's wife and what they were going through, so, can he not understand her, for once? Gautam can fathom the pain or disdain dripping in her voice and admits that he has failed in every way. He says:

> A man believes he is free to do what he wants. He can explore lands, knowledge, and passion all so easily. Not so a woman. She is not allowed to be free... Like other men, I treated you not as a wife but as most men treat most women: I thwarted you, made you inert and compliant, and restricted you to home-keeping and legal subordination. Me... he adds contemptuously. I, who made laws for women so they could uphold their rights..., I couldn't cherish my wife! (324).

Although Ahalya adamantly confesses her mistakes, she also realises that her only momentary weakness brings her a great fall. According to M.M. Arekar, "Ahalya reveals her inner strength and her graceful acceptance of the punishment rendered to her speaks volumes of her resilience" (RJELAL, Jan-March, 2023). She perceives the need for metamorphoses to control her wavering mind and heart; otherwise, she will never be able to achieve her locus of becoming a Rishika. She decides to purge herself from her previous faults, so she accepts the curse mutely; "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 that quest, you shall receive your salvation–the deliverance you searched for so long all these years" (328).

Kané finds Ahalya as a victim of a male-dominated society. She thinks, "Her transgression came because of man, her retribution too from a man. Did the world expect her redemption to also come from a man? She decides fiercely, No... She would not wake into such a world.

She would decide when to wake up, when to live again, when to breathe" (335). G.K. Khaunte says, "Ahalya's sexuality is thus portrayed to give a fresh insight into the story where she is no longer the victim, but holds the power to use her sexuality to serve her purpose" (JETIR). In the epilogue, the author brings together Ahalya and Sita, who share the same fate of injustice in the name of righteousness. She examines the double standards of the hypocritical society for women's sexuality. Ahalya becomes immobile when she meets Sita in the forest, who too is abandoned by her righteous husband Ram, the same man who redeemed her (Ahalya) from the long curse. It is astonishing to see Ram forgive Ahalya the sinner, punish Sita the innocent, forcing her to undergo the fire ordeal to prove her chastity and desert her during pregnancy. She empathises with Sita and says, "societal expectations are hypocritical, dear. They enjoy a woman being subjugated, subjecting her to a moral trial. And then lament her, 'fall' from the lofty pinnacle of female virtue, her projected chastity and fidelity. It was your chastity and my fidelity that were questioned. But what makes you worse is that you were innocent, Sita. I was not (344). She shares her beliefs with Sita and suggests that deep penance or meditation can help us attain salvation, for which there is no need for anyone's sanction or blessing. Therefore, she decides to make herself invisible to the world and promises herself that she will wake from her meditation in her own way, presenting herself as a just and enlightened soul. She emancipates herself from the shackles of high morality and establishes a new code of conduct for others. Moreover, she also makes Sita realise that "she belongs to this whole world, not just to Rama" (Volga, 2015). In the view of M. M. Arekar, "Ahalya is one of the initial advocates of women's culture in the male-dominated society" (RJELAL March 2023).

Kané picks up to answer the most burning question of all time: Did Indra deceive her? No, Ahalya says firmly, "I wasn't duped. I knew what I was doing..." she adds. "I think all of us are aware of our desires – the range and depth of them" (348). She truly accepts it because she does not want hollow sympathy from people who would reduce her to a victim of an unjust allegation. She justifies her infidelity, saying, "I searched all these years for myself – and I only found Ahalya, the woman I was supposed to be born as unblemished, without any faults. I had no hala in me, no sin, no crime, no guilt. What I had done was to respond to the call of life within me..." (345). She finds the real meaning of freedom: her happiness and unhappiness do not belong to a man but to her. Living in the forest, she can control her mind and soul, her desires and her dreams, helping her understand the value of her existence. She refuses to be a pawn in the hands of male authority; she makes his curse a blessing and lives in the forest alone, away from the rules and falseness of the world. For her, the forest is the only truthful place away from the absurdity of life, where she finds everything: her mistake, her infidelity, her recovery, and her rumination – all means to liberate herself and secure

herself. She never returns to Gautam but instead decides to seek her truth, her salvation, and her liberation from others. Her righteousness was a lie, but her transgression becomes her new truth, showing her spiritual awakening. She proudly acknowledges, "I do not need anyone, neither to love or protect nor to save or salvage me. I am the seeker of my own salvation. I liberated myself from it, from me, from Gautam, from the others" (344). Here, the author justifies her role in traditional Indian society and depicts her as a free-spirited woman:

> In a censorious world, Ahalya is the honest transgressor who is weak enough to succumb to temptation, yet brave enough to face the outcome of her decisions. In this self-journey, she empowers herself while understanding the fragility of human desire through a slow spiritual awakening (The Asian).

Ahalya not only finds her salvation and her identity but also enlightens Sita about female chastity. Besides Sita, Ahalya also perceives the plight of Sachi (Indra's wife), who never receives her husband's attention. Though their personalities are different, the state of pain is the same. They both enter their nuptial relationship full of love, care, passion, and promises, but later, their husbands' attitudes leave them indifferent to the world. She knows that Sachi is jealous of her rare beauty, but makes her realise that "Every woman is beautiful... It is up to the woman to seek and find her own beauty". S. Senthikumari states, "Ahalya became the victim of the curse of Gowthatm. Sachi was knowingly cheated by Indra. All women have two choices: either to accept what it is like, Sachi, or find redemption from the past like Ahalya" (JLLS, 2021).

Thus, we can empathise with the plight of women today and with the expectation that they follow cultural norms that confine them within a typical societal frame. Rishi Gautam exemplifies the hypocritical mindset of men towards women. For instance, he works on women's law. He considers them equal to men, even though he advocates women's sexuality and the fulfilment of their carnal desires by another man when their husbands are busy with their penance, yet fails to accept his wife's transgression and curses her for remaining immobile. Now the question arises, why did it go wrong in Ahalya's case? Isn't she the victim of long ignorance? Is it only Ahalya's mistake, or Gautam's as well? And if he admits his fault, what right does he have to curse her? Here, Ahalya conveys the message to the world, "We need to look within our hearts and minds and make our own amends, cleansing ourselves in the process and finally achieving tranquillity. The best of us need eternal vigilance: we cannot escape our faults, our decisions, our choices" (326).

In conclusion, Ahalya's role demonstrates the so-called moral standard of the patriarchal society where every woman like Ahalya is placed on a high pedestal of fidelity and suffers a lot to seek her existence. Here, the author gives voice to the most voiceless character of the Indian epic, traces the missing part of her life, and brings her into the limelight. This study

outlined her epistemic agency and spiritual interiority by unfolding her zeal for knowledge, her love, her transgression, and her salvation, in which she remains invisible to the world and seeks her solace through deep meditation. Unlike the other women, who think that without men, they don't exist in the world, Ahalya has been shown to create her identity on her own. Thus, a new image of Ahalya has emerged here, who signifies the struggle of a woman from the ancient to the modern world. It is not only Ahalya's story, but that of every woman who is subjugated and subjected to trial by a hypocritical society; they need to introspect and speak out for themselves.

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