

Feminist (Re)visioning of the Eponymous Virgin in Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening*

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Abstract

Myth revisionism has become the most influential trend in postmodern literature to foreground the hidden and underlined elements of the mythical classical artifacts and cast them in the shade of contemporary relevance. This article will investigate Kavita Kane's contemporary reinvention and reinterpretation of mythology through the lens of feminism, and also delineates Ahalya's authentic presentation as depicted in the mythological texts. The argument exposes long-established misogynistic notions regarding women and the need for feminist revisioning through the work of Indian feminists such as Malashri Lal and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. The expression feminism came into use in mythology when the writers engaged in reinventing the presentation of women characters in the epics. The feminist perspective was deployed by contemporary women novelists to re-invent the classical women characters. Contemporary Indian women writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Pratibha Ray, Githa Hariharan, Malashri Lal, Kavita Kane, and Koral Dasgupta among others have reinterpreted Indian myths and reinvented the mythical women protagonists in the Indian epics. Here we analyse Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019)¹ via a contemporary humanitarian standpoint that delineates the struggle of Ahalya for being studious, and her perseverance to become a rishika but ends up meeting a curse imposed by her husband. This study highlights the novelist's challenge to the socially built stereotypes of women and gender roles that compelled them to live their lives in a confined manner and coerced them to conform to patriarchal norms.

Keywords: contemporary relevance, feminist revisioning, Indian mythology, mythical reinterpretation, patriarchal norms, postmodern literature

Introduction

The word 'myth' is derived from the Greek word 'mythos', which means "story." Myths are generally culture-specific and are associated with cultural ethos. Myths may recreate incidents connected to religious rituals and customs. Myth is both a verbal and literal representation of culture. Throughout history, people have modified and repeated myths from generation to generation. Myths have an inescapable omnipresence and propensity to appear in daily life through dreams, rituals, customs, and belief systems. Myth impacts and shapes not only the psyche of an individual but also the entire cultural aspects of any community.

Since ancient times, the great Indian mythological epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, have served as beacons for Indian society. The grand narratives depict men as

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¹ Kavita Kane, *Ahalya's Awakening* (India: Westland Publication, 2019).

the upholders of the dharmas, while women characters are given little significance. As Nabaneeta Dev Sen, an Indian writer talks about the roles of women in the epic, and how the male characters have been presented with valor and glory precisely by epical sages stating:

The ideals of the epic world obviously do not have much to share with women, nor do the women enjoy the heroic values. There is little they can do there—other than get abducted or rescued, or pawned, or molested, or humiliated in some way or other. So, what happens when women choose to retell an epic?²

In the twenty-first century, numerous Indian writers have engaged themselves in writing mythological fiction. They have miraculously incorporated myths and reinvented mythical characters. These characters have been grafted at this time.

The Indian feminist thinker Chandra Talpade Mohanty expresses her views on rewriting history from a feminist perspective, arguing that it erases not only the aperture, but also this practice leads to quenching the quest for self-identity:

Feminist analysis has always recognized the centrality of rewriting and remembering history, a process that is significant not merely as a corrective to the gaps, erasures, and misunderstanding of hegemonic masculinist history but because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity.³

Kavita Kane (b. 1966) is a Pune-based Indian woman novelist known for her mythological novels. She is a prominent figure in Indian mythological writings along with other prolific writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Shanghai, and Devdutt Pattanaik, among others. Her significant novels such as *Sita's Sister* (2014), *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2014), *Lanka's Princess* (2017), and *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) recount the saga of marginalized mythical women characters.

In her delineation of classical women characters are uniquely independent, strong-willed, and rational in approach and she has given a fresh perspective to a fictional world that is often rife with the conflict between myth and modernity. Kane has brilliantly offered an alternative modernity to the feminine world. While other revisionists are trying to give space to the celebrated women protagonists, Kane has dealt with the most neglected and overlooked mythical women figures who were relegated to the periphery and excluded beyond the epical scale, be it Ahalya, Urmila, Uruvi, and Surpankha. In the interview published in *The New Indian Express*, Kane remarked, “We often view mythology through the men’s point of view, rarely the women’s, once the spotlight falls on these minor female characters, we see them as independent individuals who have their own story to tell, hidden in the larger narrative.”⁴

² Nabaneeta Dev Sen, “When Women Retell the Ramayan”, *Manushi*, no. 108 (2021): p. 18.

³ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 78.

⁴ Anil Srinivasan, “Epics Would be Lost if Not Retold: Kavita Kane,” *The New Indian Express*, 3 September (2018). At: www.newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/2018/sep/03/epics-would-be-lost-if-not-retold-kavita-kane-2866758.html. Accessed 20/07/2023.

The Mythical Presentation of Ahalya: The First Among the Five Virgins

The classical mythical women in the epics are celebrated and cherished for their sacrifices, and women in Indian society are taught to be like them. The epical narratives present a variety of female figures, each of which substantially impacts the overall structure of grand narrative. In the epics, every woman at the top has a unique history and struggles, even if she is a princess or a queen. Among all, the five iconic women are considered the destroyer of enormous failings and the pinnacle of feminism, and are called the *Panchakanyas* (five virgins): Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, and Mandodari.

Ahalya is extolled as the first of the *Panchakanyas* and is often described as an *ayonijasambhava*, one who is not born of a woman. *The Brahma Purana*, Part IV, Chapter XVI, depicts the story and origin of Ahalya. She was the most beautiful creation of Lord Brahma, possessing good qualities. She was a girl with exquisitely lovely features, and because of her beauty, Brahma handed her over to the sage Gautam to raise. Brahma was aware of Gautam's power of penance and ordered him by saying, "Protect and bring up (this girl), o excellent sage till she attains the age of youth. When she attains youth, bring her back to me."⁵

When Gautam returned Ahalya to Brahma afterward, Brahma announced that Ahalya would be married to the person who would circumambulate the Earth. On hearing the words of Lord Brahma, the *devas* proceeded ahead in their circumambulation of the Earth. Gautam used his intelligence and circumambulated the *kama-dhenu* cow, who had partially delivered a calf, and then the *Linga* of the lord of *devas*, who represents the entire earth. To be delighted by Gautam's intelligent act, Brahma handed over Ahalya to Gautam by saying, "O sage Gautam of good holy rites, I am pleased with your effort, courage, knowledge, and, penance. O great sage, this girl, the most excellent one in the world is given to you."⁶

The wedding of Gautam and Ahalya infuriated Indra. *The Brahma Vaivarta Mahapurana*, Part IV, recounts the story of Ahalya and Indra in the *Krsna-Janama-khanda*, Chapter 47. The *Mahapurana* unfolds the story that Indra achieved the presidency of the gods by performing a hundred *yajnas*. He was bestowed with Siddhamantara's knowledge by Brhaspati, and for a century, he kept reciting these mantras and got accomplished. But unfortunately, he turned out to be arrogant. Subsequently, he got cursed from Prakrti and his teacher Brhaspati. Ahalya's seduction by Indra is described as follows:

Thereafter Indra went to the river Mandakini
for taking a bath and he found the beautiful wife of Gautama there,
who was smiling serenely with side glances at the sight of his developed breasts and
the pelvic region,
Indra was infested with passion and he fainted there...
At that point in time the wife of the sage felt fatigued because of passion and fainted.⁷

By the river, Indra met Ahalya and was united with her disguised as Gautam. Meanwhile, sage Gautam arrived and was enraged to find his wife and Indra in a compromising position. Part

⁵ UNESCO and Government of India, *The Brahma Purana* (India: Motilal Banarasidas, 1955), p. 819.

⁶ UNESCO and Government of India, *The Brahma Purana*, p. 821.

⁷ Shanti Lal Nagar (trans.), *The Brahma Vaivarta MahaPurana* (India: Parimal Publications, 2003), p. 374.

IV, chapter 47 recites the curse of Gautam to Indra, “Therefore a hundred yoni would develop over your body /and for full one year the smell of the yoni would emerge from your body.”⁸

After this humiliation, Gautam cursed Indra that he was very passionate about the vulva; therefore, a hundred vulvas would erupt over his body for a whole year, and the smell of the vulva would emanate from his body. Enraged Gautam cursed his wife for being sexually involved with Indra. Gautam cursed Ahalya to remain invisible,

For countless years, disloyal spouse,
Devoted to severest vows,
Thy bed the ashes, air thy food,
Here shalt thou live in solitude.
This lonely grove thy home shall be,
And not an eye thy form shall see...
And make the sinner pure again.⁹

Ahalya was cursed for her unwitting betrayal of her husband to be invisible in solitude for countless years until Lord Ram, the elder son of King Dasaratha, liberated her from the curse. Lord Ram’s appearance shall lift the curse, and she will restore her physical form and purity.

Stereotypical Perceptions Regarding Women

Simone de Beauvoir’s oft-quoted statement in *The Second Sex*, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman,”¹⁰ means that gender roles are set by society and play a definitive factor in making one a ‘woman’. De Beauvoir has established the fact that having a conscious awareness of one’s body is crucial during formative years. A girl’s formative years are also associated with her deliberate attempts to become feminine by projecting an image of weakness and docility. These conventional images are interwoven and showcased in the novel illustrating Beauvoir’s description of the cultural and social construction of women as ‘other’.

In Indian society, stereotypes regarding women are rampant, and they are constantly supported by male authoritarianism. Since ancient times, women have been viewed as less capable than men. They were forced to get married and have children at a young age because of orthodox beliefs which deprived them of education. For a long time, traditional beliefs have been the cause of women’s misery and oppression. As Susan Wadley rightly suggests,

Classical Hindu Laws focus almost exclusively on women as wives, role models and norms for mothers, daughters, and sisters are more apt to appear in folklore and vernacular traditions.¹¹

Kavita Kane’s *Ahalya’s Awakening* recounts the saga of the mythical protagonist, who is depicted as the princess of the Puru dynasty and the offspring of King Mudgal and Queen

⁸ Nagar, *The Brahma Vaivarta MahaPurana*, p. 374.

⁹ Ralph T. H. Griffith (trans.), *The Ramayana of Valmiki* (London: Luzac and Co., 1895), p. 61.

¹⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (United States: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 330.

¹¹ Susan Wadley, “Women and the Hindu Tradition”, *Signs*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1977), p. 117.

Nalayani. In the novel's opening scene, Kane unveils traditional views regarding women to exhibit the parents' fascination and enchantment with their daughter's extreme beauty, as Queen Nalayani says, "She is simply... oh, so, so beautiful."¹² This foregrounds how society prioritizes a woman's beauty and physical charm over her intelligence and mental abilities.

The right to education is equitable to all, but women in Indian society could hardly showcase their attainments in that sphere. In the novel *Ahalya*, being a brilliant girl, aspires to satisfy her quest for knowledge but she could not convince her parents. Being a woman, Nalayani wishes to confine her daughter to domesticity. She is more interested in nurturing her son's ambitions than her daughter's. As she unequivocally instructs Ahalya, "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."¹³

In society, men were valued and privileged for their accomplishment and positions, while women were solely prized for their physical charm as in the corpus of the text Kane levels her attack on the lopsided perspective of men when Indra tries to view women as objects of desire. As a mouthpiece of the male chauvinist ideology in Indian society, he believes, "But women are considered to be more pleasing to the eye than men. Why not enjoy the attention and the flattery that comes with that?"¹⁴

Long-standing traditions and customs dictate that women in Indian society are not allowed to make their own decisions and are required to marry according to the preferences of their family households. Women were not permitted to express their views and make their choices because they were seen as having lower decision-making capacity. *The Laws of Manu*. puts emphasis on the need to control women because of their wicked character and the duties and roles assigned to them,

In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be in-dependent... she must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; by leaving them she would make both her own and her husband's families contemptible.¹⁵

As happened to Ahalya, her family constantly ignored all her desires and decisions. Her family disregarded her thirst for knowledge and her goal to become a rishika. Later, when she chooses Gautam over Indra for marriage, her family dejectedly acknowledges her choice, even though they had intended for her to marry Indra. A. S. Altekar's observation on women's role in marriage and the selection of their life partners is relevant. As he suggests, "When society had conceded to grown up brides the right to choose their husbands, it was but natural that love marriages... but the bride herself, who has the right of giving herself away in marriage."¹⁶

Women's decisions were never accepted and even if accepted, it was with severe reservations. As happens with Ahalya, when after marriage and having children with Gautam, she was unhappy with him, and her mother started to question her decision, "The perfect man

¹² Kane, *Ahalya's Awakening*, p. 7.

¹³ Kane, *Ahalya's Awakening*, p. 28.

¹⁴ Kane, *Ahalya's Awakening*, p. 40.

¹⁵ George Buhler (trans.), *The Laws of Manu* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), p. 195.

¹⁶ A. S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: From Prehistoric Time to the Present Day* (India: The Culture Publication House, 1938), p. 78.

need not be perfect, but it is sufficient if he is perfectly suited for you. He was right here and I didn't see him! Just like Indra was right there but you chose Gautam instead"¹⁷

Like the French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett has also argued that patriarchy has been interiorizing the ideology of femininity, which has resulted in their inferior status. According to Millett, both culturally and ideologically, women have been prevented from crossing designated borders to preserve the ruthless dominance of patriarchy. Throughout the matrix of the novel, Kane makes a sustained and sincere effort to interrogate all the conventional and orthodox beliefs that forced women to a miserable existence.

The Feminist (Re)interpretation of Ahalya

The feminist poet-critic Adrienne Rich offers the term 're-vision' as entering an old text from a new perspective. She considers, "Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical perspective - is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival."¹⁸ Another critic, Alicia Ostriker made use of the term 'revisionist mythmaking' and considers it to be like an old vessel filled with new wine. Kane has grappled with the status of mythical women (the old vessel) and has given them a profound space in the modern world (the new wine). As Ostriker rightly observes,

Since the core of revisionist mythmaking for women poets lies in the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth, revisionism in its simplest form consists of hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them.¹⁹

In *Ahalya's Awakening*, the protagonist is a beautiful girl with a real thirst for learning; she can be easily set apart from other young girls of her age. Her questioning spirit was noticed after her formative years and adolescence. Ahalya's inquisitiveness grew at a young age, as seen by her incessant queries, such as when she questions her Guru why the earth is not called a father but a mother. As a child, Ahalya emerges as a gifted girl blessed with miraculous beauty and a brain. As she says, "I am proud of my family, but that legacy, again, has been bestowed on me. It's a privilege, not a consequence of my personal abilities."²⁰

Throughout the warp and woof of the novel she has a mind of her own. Ahalya's mother desires her to woo Indra who is mesmerized by her charm. Nevertheless, Ahalya politely refuses this proposal at once. Nalayani's insistent coercion of Ahalya to wed at the age of sixteen reminds Beauvoir's concept of marriage that what society traditionally offers women is marriage. Beauvoir elucidates that, according to society, marriage is a woman's destiny. She further adds that "Marriage today still retains this traditional form. And, first of all, it is imposed far more imperiously on the young girl than on the young man."²¹

¹⁷ Kane, *Ahalya's Awakening*, p. 256.

¹⁸ Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision", *National Council of Teachers of English*, vol. 34, no. 1 (1972), p. 18.

¹⁹ Alicia Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking", *Signs*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1982), pp. 73-74.

²⁰ Kane, *Ahalya's Awakening*, p. 21.

²¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 507.

Ahalya's parents initially rejected and undermined her aspiration for knowledge and appeal to go to the ashram; however, when the kingdom is on the verge of attack, they decide to send her to the rishi Gautam's ashram in the name of her education. Their quick consent upsets Ahalya when she learns the reason from rishi Gautam. In the ashram, she discusses with Gautam about the laws governing women, the imposition, and the rationale behind marriage in society. Ahalya is impressed to hear Gautam's equitable and impartial opinions regarding women and Gautam mentions a few of his women scholars. And he challenges ideas about male supremacy. As he remarks,

I strongly believe a woman can do more jobs simultaneously. Planning, strategizing, taking risks, moving forward, retracting when needed- these are all parts of a woman's daily life. A man tends to categorize his life, day, and relationships very simply: into discrete divisions! But yes, we need to acknowledge intellect and that passion for knowledge without prejudice, as your parents did.²²

Ahalya acquires knowledge on significant topics and themes during her sojourn in the ashram. She becomes fascinated by Gautam's morally sound opinions, and he is equally astounded by her sharp brain and quick wit. As time passes, she starts feeling for Gautam, who admires her reasonable thinking and supports her morally and emotionally during difficult times. She decides to wed the man who prioritizes her intelligence and wisdom over her status and beauty.

The author has demonstrated two distinctive male ideologies. Both Indra and Gautam are representatives of male ideology with disparities. Indra is consumed by self-obsession and has an egocentric nature that regards women as inferior and objectifies them as objects of pleasure. His enormous obsession to get Ahalya appears in his dialogue "I *shall* win you, I *shall* woo you, Ahalya. You shall be *mine!*"²³. Moreover, Gautam is composed, knowledgeable, and self-sufficient. He believes in gender-equal treatment and has respect for women. When he speaks about Ahalya to Narad, his remarks become more reverent, "She's no prize to be claimed. She's a woman to be cherished!"²⁴ Ahalya's selection of Gautam confirms the fact that a woman prioritizes dignity and love over position and status in her life.

After marrying Gautam, Ahalya has been bestowed with greater responsibilities. She helps her husband to run the ashram and is much more devoted to domestic chores. Even after getting hitched and having many duties, she is steadfastly committed to her learning and education. Once having discussions with Gautam and his disciple Uttank, she is appalled to hear Uttank's narration when Rishi Veda's wife asks him to sleep with her. The incident surprises her, and she is even more shocked to hear Gautam say he regards this as a common practice. He retorts that, when her husband is engaged in meditation, the rishi's wife is free to indulge in sexual practice outside her marriage. The liberal views of Gautam become clear when he explains how in ancient times women were free to choose their sex partners outside marriage. At that time, there was no concept of marriage for men and women until patriarchy established the concept of marriage, and the notion of fidelity was introduced for women. Ahalya is astonished to learn about this practice because according to her, it is infidelity and

²² Kane, *Ahalya's Awakening*, p. 91.

²³ Kane, *Ahalya's Awakening*, p. 126.

²⁴ Kane, *Ahalya's Awakening*, p. 137.

cheating, but Gautam believes that the infidelity of a rishi's wife was put to a test according to the situation, and she was more loyal to her husband and upstanding in general. When it comes to other people, Gautam's perspective and critical thinking is unbiased and free from prejudice on different matters, but when Ahalya questions whether would he allow her to do the same, it is not so. Then, he calmly states that he has faith in her and that she would not act in such a way because she is more upright and her principles forbid it.

Over time, Ahalya discovers herself occupied with the responsibilities of her children and the ashram. Hardly, she could manage time for her studies, and Gautam was too preoccupied with his pursuit of learning. He didn't improve of Ahalya's protective behaviour towards his male disciple. They became estranged from each other. Ahalya made strenuous effort to ensure opportunities for learning. Nonetheless, her dreams are shattered when her husband, Gautam refused to support her. She feels she has been betrayed by her husband. However, she is still aware of her miserable condition and dares to handle the situation when her mother questions her choice, she states,

I am still a person who made an independent decision, Ma. I was convinced of my choice and I remain as convinced about the consequences of that choice. Yes, I am a help to my husband: I help him run the ashram, I help him make his decisions, and I help him with his problems.²⁵

As Altekar suggests, the parameter of a happy married life is that, "A marriage can become happy only when each party dedicates its entire existence for promoting the happiness and welfare of the other."²⁶ However, in Ahalya's case, her dreams for her conjugal life are shattered, and the feeling of estrangement is gnawing at her innermost core. She feels left out and excluded, and unwelcome in the mainstream world of learning, knowledge, and wisdom.

Their relationship became distraught, and the distance between them grew over time. She wants her husband back but becomes dispersed after learning of his life-long celibacy, as he is no longer her husband. She continued to fulfil her wifely obligations and was always with him, but now her husband has made a significant decision without consulting her and even without informing her. She considers her role in Gautam's life and everything he had accomplished solely for himself. Ahalya questions him about his responsibilities toward his wife and her demands. However, none of her requests could budge Gautam from his penance and adamance. She vehemently questions Gautam, asking if whatever Rishi Veda's wife did was ethical for you, "Would you allow me to pursue sexual fulfilment with another man?" Ahalya is devastated and finds it difficult to understand that her husband has left her and has changed from a lover into a celibate. Ahalya simply wanted to have a good and cheerful life with her family. She exclaims, "I am but a 'normal' woman with 'normal' needs."²⁷ She had been awaiting her husband's attention for years, but now her emotions are so stirred up that she feels powerless to control the situation.

Years later, Indra's obsession with Ahalya was still the same, and he was aware of her pathetic state at this time. Deceptively, Indra plans to meet her to apologize, but his evil

²⁵ Kane, *Ahalya's Awakening*, p. 267.

²⁶ Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, p. 57.

²⁷ Kane, *Ahalya's Awakening*, p. 272.

intentions are capable of disrupting the lives of all three. Since Ahalya was already broken, she failed to understand Indra's devious plan. By inquiring about her husband and complimenting him, he tried winning her over while demonstrating his regard for her. Ahalya fell into the trap hatched by Indra because she was completely unaware of his plot. Indra seduces Ahalya in Gautam's guise. Although, Ahalya recognized him but could not help making love with him because she finally got what she had yearned for years.

Gautam discerns the trickery of Indra and the seduction of his wife. Enraged Gautam curses Indra for molesting his wife, causing thousands of vulvas to cover his body, which carries shame to him for the indecent crime he had committed. Ahalya cries out in agonizing certainty, horrified by the atrocity she had committed. With regret, Gautam accuses Ahalya of ruining their relationship, marriage, and the shared responsibility for the children's work, and the ashram. With contrition, Ahalya questions Gautam about her existence in his life. He refuses to acknowledge her sentiments, uses her for his ends, and then abandons her. She sobs as she explains that it is not only her mistake that if she received the respect she earned, there would not be any Indra between them. Gautam realizes why she acted the way she did and is aware of his mistake of ignoring his wife's desires and demands. Ahalya questioned whether it was necessary to lose her respect for him to get his attention back, and why he had not understood her earlier. She says disappointedly, that she always longed for Gautam, not Indra:

Yes, I do, but have you ever heard me?...And punish me for what? That I felt desire- a desire *you*, as my husband, could not perceive or satiate? ... Why don't you say that I strayed because our marriage failed to deliver the love and passion it promised?! You are punishing me... I wanted you, not Indra, never Indra! She mumbled, her voice breaking I wanted a man, my man to make love to me... in that search, I got lost!²⁸

Gautam confesses his shortcomings in managing his marriage's responsibilities. He acknowledges that it is his fault for not being able to keep his wife in a blissful state, as he promised. However, his rage becomes uncontrollable when Ahalya pleads with Gautam to pardon her. He says in rage that she wanted to be a rishika and was one. She possessed all the traits of a rishika, yet her sharp intellect and wide knowledge failed her when she most needed them. Despite maintaining a magnanimous and equipoised temperament throughout the novel, Gautam ultimately adopted a patriarchal tone, believing that women should not have the same status as men. He then says that despite writing the laws protecting women's rights, he was unable to save his wife's honor. He blames Ahalya for destroying the lives of both of them.

After hearing what she had to say and realizing his follies and foibles in wedlock, Gautam blames Ahalya for being unable to control her sexual desires. He claims that when the thoughts of love, marriage, and children entered her mind, her plan to become a rishika was interrupted. He claims that she had always yearned for calm and illumination in her life but had instead become ensnared in the flames of sensual pleasures. He curses Ahalya in his final remarks to turn into a rock until she receives her salvation with the touch of Lord Ram.

In Kane's novel, Ahalya's story of liberation by Lord Ram does not close on a final note, but Kane has made it commendable to show Sita's meeting with Ahalya. Ahalya meets

²⁸ Kane, *Ahalya's Awakening*, pp. 323-325.

the goddess Sita, who is now a forest dweller along with her sons Luv and Kush. The accidental, and unexpected encounter of Ahalya with Sita adds a vantage point for a perfect ending to the novel that centers itself on a strong and courageous woman, who is labelled by societal norms and abandoned by her loved ones. The novel lends a fresh perspective to the eponymous virgin who is not at all scared to accept her flaws. She is aware of her desires, transgression, and the impending disaster. The complex character of Ahalya has been brought into the spotlight by this retelling. In Hindu mythology, Ahalya is widely known for her promiscuity, as she is seduced by Indra, cursed by her husband sage Gautama, and finally liberated by Rama. Kane as a mythological novelist, ventures into the protagonist's life, by casting her in the mould of an ambitious woman who longs for an identity of her own till the end.

Conclusion

Thus, the (re)telling and (re)visioning of the myth from the feministic perspective, has unearthed the unidimensional flow of male chauvinism in the patriarchal society. The study sought to highlight societal norms as the underlying forces in suppressing a woman's identity. As Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett suggested the characteristics of a woman are ingrained in the ideology from an early age and trained to fit into these categories. This article has identified the gaps and fissures in Indian society and how these may prove detrimental to the growth and development of women.

In conclusion, we have pinpointed how stereotypical beliefs and perceptions are formed and how these forces compel women to be within the confines of their loved ones and, if a woman crosses the threshold, she is at once damned and punished. Even after making numerous sacrifices and being dedicated to the family, Gautam was never able to understand Ahalya's true feelings which was his fault, but she was the one who had to suffer the consequences. She was a vulnerable victim of Gautam's neglect and righteousness and Indra's obsessive lust for her. Ahalya violated the marital norms but she was not the only one to blame. By reinterpreting the character as strong, assertive, and rebellious, Kane has demonstrated that a woman is not an entity that can be controlled and manipulated according to patriarchal demands. And if necessary, a woman can stand up for her pride, dignity, and rights against her people. One must concede that a woman is capable of stepping out of the four walls of domesticity and raising her voice to preserve and protect feminine pride and dignity. Needless to say that as first among the five virgins who represents the surface of the world, Ahalya is an exemplary figure and makes an indelible mark on the minds and hearts of the sensitive reading public living in an era of feminism marked with intersectionality.