Subalternity and Resistance: A Study of Ahalya in Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening*

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Abstract

Antonio Gramsci used the term 'subaltern' in his *Prison Notebook* to represent society's oppressed/lower class. Later on, Ranajit Guha, a member of the Subaltern Studies Group, broadened the term to use it towards all forms of suppressed classes in society in the context of class, caste, gender, etc. In her essay "Can the subaltern speak?", Gayatri Spivak included colonised women within the subaltern group who she believed were doubly oppressed by patriarchy and colonialism. Feminist critics consider women as the non-elite subaltern in society as they are both marginalised and suppressed by men who act as the authority. Like the Sudras in the social hierarchy, the ancient laws considered women as possessions of men; they were denied the agency of voice. The paper intends to study Ahalya, a minor female character from mythology as a subaltern figure and how she is recreated in Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* as a counter-narrative voice to the dominant discourse of the *Ramayana*. Kane's narrative is primarily concerned with the retrieval of Ahalya from the original marginalised position to selfhood. In the grand narrative of the *Ramayana*, she remains a minor character whose existence is asserted so as to highlight the divinity of the male protagonist, Ram and the ascetic power of her husband, rishi Gautam and more importantly, to re-establish the strict codes on female sexuality. Her neglected tale in the original epic is brought to the forefront and retold from her own voice in *Ahalya's Awakening*. The paper studies Ahalya as a subaltern and further elaborates on how Kane's revisionist text resists the androcentric narrative of the *Ramayana*.

Keywords: Feminism; Marginalization; Mythology; Resistance; Subaltern.

Introduction

The word "subaltern" implies the section of people in the social hierar-

chy controlled by those in power and denied the authority of voice in the system. The concept of subaltern has become essential in contemporary times, where the main concern is the inclusion of the marginalised group and giving them the agency of voice. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci first used the term "Subaltern" in his *Prison Notebook* in reference to the workers/lower class people who were deprived of their fundamental rights. His motive in studying the concept was to explore the voice of the subaltern. He believed a nation's historical accounts to favour the authority and realised its biases against the subordinate. He first used the term 'subaltern' to refer to "the workers and peasants who were oppressed and discriminated by the leader of the National Fascist Party" (Louai 5). The concept was primarily used in the context of "any 'low rank' person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation" (Louai 5). According to Gramsci, the subaltern group or class does not have a political voice in a hegemonic order. Because they are deprived of opinion in the dominant ideology, their history is represented by the dominant history.

In India, the term "subaltern" was later borrowed by Ranajit Guha, the founder and a member of the Subaltern Studies Group and used it to correct the elitist preconception of writing history in the colonial period. He argues that the Indian bourgeoisie failed to speak for the nation, and there were many areas in the life and consciousness of the people which were never integrated into their hegemony (5-6). The term "subaltern" was broadened to incorporate any oppressed group not included within the purview of the elite history. Though it started as an engagement with the development of nationalism, the peasant's rebellions, the real question that he asked was "how far various subaltern groups, whether women, peasants, outcastes, the working-class, tribals, the downtrodden, or other marginalised people who had been relegated to the periphery of Indian society, had been able to make history and constitute their politics as an 'autonomous realm'" (Lal 136). In the context of India, the Subaltern Studies Group used the term 'subaltern' as a reference against the lower/minority and marginalised classes whose voices have been silenced throughout history. He also acknowledged the common notion of resistance among the subaltern groups against the dominant class. Following Antonio's views, he shared that the historical accounts favour the elitist group. The main agenda of the subaltern study is to retrieve the history/narrative of the subaltern and provide them with the agency of voice.

As far as gender or women's issues are concerned, the question of gender is often neglected in the Subaltern Studies. In "Pygmalion Nation: Towards a Critique of Subaltern Studies and the 'Resolution of the Women's Question'", Bannerji acknowledges this absence and says, "their subalternity is rendered invisible or unimportant" (69). Sharing the view, Spivak opines in her essay, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography", "Woman is the neglected syntagm of the semiosis of subalternity of insurgency" (217). Asserting the importance of including women within the concept, Spivak further writes of how the group "overlook how important the concept-metaphor woman is to the functioning of their discourse" (215). In her critique of the theory of subaltern in "Can the subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Spivak included the colonised/third world women within the subaltern group, emphasising their double marginalisation and absence of voice, bringing forth the importance of the 'woman's question' in subaltern studies. She asserts that if the subaltern cannot speak in colonial history, the female subaltern is subjected to greater marginalisation and oppression- in the ladder of class hierarchy and male hegemonic power. Mahum Qureshi in the article "Woman—The Subaltern in Subaltern Studies" observes the negligence of subaltern theorists to include women as a subaltern group and insists that women become the subaltern within the subaltern group.

The concept of subaltern has been appropriated in the context of women by Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" where she discusses third world women as doubly oppressed and deprived of voice. She further asserts that a subaltern female suffers far more than a male subaltern because of the already existing patriarchal hegemony. The exploitation and suppression that women had faced at the hands of men over the years, and their marginalisation as the other, make her the non-elite class/lower class in the gender hierarchy. Considering the denial of voice to women throughout history, women as a whole may be considered a 'subaltern' in the social structure of patriarchy. The permeance of the term from the peasant insurgence to any form of resistance erased in the real historiography facilitates us to use it in a broader theoretical concept involving marginalised groups.

In India, the mythology, legends and ancient scriptures are often the source of the formation of modern Hinduism. Society is informed of these marvellous stories of Rama, Pandavas, Sita and Draupadi, and such ancient narratives are put in the highest order. Joseph Baumgartner *et al* in "Myth and Mythology" defines myth as "a story, narrative, of deeds of the gods and spirits, whether in heaven or on earth or in the nether world"

(195). They observed the connection between the world of gods and the human spheres and aver that "the world and work of the gods as reported by myth constitute both the essence and the norm for the world of man" (195). Indian religion is also bound by mythology. The mythological tales are often the stories of the connection between Gods and human beings and ingrained in which are the deeds and performances rendered to the world as knowledge and wisdom. It is not all about religion but it is the historiography of Gods and their creations. The truth in mythology is often questionable. Thus, F. W. J. Schelling asked:

> How should I take it?" More accurately it is expressed as "Should I take it as truth or not as truth?"…When a sequence of real events is recounted to us in a detailed and intelligible narrative, then it will occur to none of us to ask what this account means. Its meaning lies simply in the fact that the events recounted are real. We presuppose, in him who is reciting them to us, the intention of informing us, and we ourselves listen to him with the intention of being informed. (Lecture One)

While contextualising the epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the profundity of truth is imposed on human beings as these epics, even claimed as mythological have underlying meanings and intentions of telling the narratives with doctrinal meaning.

The relationship between history and myth is often considered contradictory in nature. The tussle between history and myth is quite evident while communicating the veracity of something. The dominance of historiography dares to replace whatever is not truth as myth. Peter Munz in "History and Myth" states that myth and history are interdependent. They are "stories of concrete events, said to have taken place at a certain time and to have involved certain people" (1). Lacking precision in time and place about the events that happened gives more accountability to the objective historiography. The blurring of reality and myths gives the position of seeing myths in terms of historiography as having some ideological functions. The rules and regulations in the mythological tales possess the instructive values and teachings which become dogma. In many mythological narratives, the ideals and standards are constructed to be followed.

The practice of retelling in modern times has questioned the predominant archetypes in mythological narratives. The revisionist approaches intend to redefine the silence and gap in the narrative approach, whether it may be in history or myths which both are told from the vantage point

of subjectivity. Alicia Ostriker in her article "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking", talks about the term "Revisionist mythmaking" and argues that whenever a feminist poet employs "a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture" she is using myth and that will definitely be revisionist: "that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible"(72). Furthermore, she says "myth belongs to 'high' culture and is handed 'down' through the ages by religious, literary, and educational authority" (72). Thus, mythology is equivalent to what Ranajit Guha called the "elitist historiography with some aspects of the ideology of the elite as the dominant ideology of that period" (2). Such writing or rendition cannot explain, acknowledge or interpret the people at the margins, in this case, the mythological female characters. Through revisionist mythmaking, women writers challenge the gender disparity embodied in myth. Feminist retellings emerge as a response to the androcentric presentation of mythological texts to refute the biased projection of the sexes and break the hierarchy that has subdued women. Expressing the necessity of retellings, Adrienne Rich writes, "Re-vision is an act of looking back…for women… it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society" (35). As portrayed in epic stories, a woman is traditionally expected to be a quiet, forgiving, silent and submissive follower of her man.

Thus, this paper attempts to study a mythological woman character as a subaltern figure emphasising her silenced voice. The female characters in Hindu mythology, depicted in accordance with the description of female identity in the ancient Brahmanical laws, remain mute and voiceless. This article will concern with the study of Ahalya as a marginalised voice in the *Ramayana* and will further reflect on how Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) asserts the female voice as a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of the original epic.

Subalternity and Resistance: Feminist Retelling of Ahalya

The objective of feminist retelling of mythology very much resembled the Subaltern Studies for its reflection on women as subalterns. In his article "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," Ranajit Guha said, "The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism" (1). Moreover, this elitism had the prejudice that the making of the Indian nation and the nationalist consciousness were exclusively or predominantly elite achievements (1). The Hindu Vedas

were always considered the highest form of knowledge and it represented the Hindu philosophy which could be taken as an elite venture to subordinate the other classes.

In the Hindu tradition, the woman figure is established as the man's follower and he, the head of the household. The ancient Hindu laws like *Manusmriti* (The Laws of Manu) dictated separate roles of man and woman whereby the man became the authority who had the potential rights to control the woman. The Brahmanical laws thus regulated men to exercise absolute control over women (especially their sexuality). Uma Chakravarti in "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India" shows the interconnection between caste/class division and controlling of women (and their sexuality). In both cases, the power/control management is done by the authority that is the higher caste/class men in whose favour the ancient laws were dictated. *The Laws of Manu*, for instance, repeatedly asserts that women are inherently seductive and lustful and should be kept in control. This control of women and their sexuality is exercised through various factors. A certain idealisation of womanhood- being chaste and faithful to the husband, was established so that woman themselves would control their sexuality to achieve the ideal position, "stridharma, or pativratadharma, was a rhetorical device to ensure the social control of women" (Chakravarti 147-148). In addition, male kins were entrusted with safeguarding their women. In the dictation of Manusmriti, they were given the right to carry out physical punishments if women acted beyond the Brahmanical codes. Laws were also enforced to ensure the same. If we have to bring in Guha in this context, such Brahmanical codes operated on some ideological levels which "reflected the diversity of its social composition with the outlook of its leading elements dominating that of the others at any particular time and within any particular event" (5).

The epic tradition operates at the androcentric level where men are shown as heroes and saviours and women as vulnerable and meek with no choice for resurgence. The religious agency sometimes acts as an exploitative tool and the space for the expression of elite hegemony. Women were pushed to the margin in portraying men's valour and strength. The suppression of their voice in the patriarchal hegemony was reflected in the portrayal of their characters in the epic stories. Apart from the side-lined female characters like Ahalya, Urmila, Mandodari, Uruvi, etc. who were completely denied their voice, even the prominent women figures like Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, were also all subjugated and subjected to male authority.

Analysing the position of women in ancient India, Uma Chakravarti states

in "The Development of the Sita Myth" that "'good woman' is synonymous with a good wife" (222) which can be interpreted from the idealisation of Sita and from other mythological stories like that of Savitri, Damayanti, etc. She further opines that the other mythological female characters like "Draupadi, Gandhari, Arundhati, and even Ahalya, are all seen in the context of their husbands" (222). This very notion of womanhood, as propagated by the Brahmanical laws further victimised women where obeying, sacrificing, and submitting became their virtues. Through the institutionalisation of ideal womanhood and the practice of patriarchal devices like early marriage, sati and stringent codes on widowhood, the marginalisation of women has been normalised where they are deprived of their individuality and voice.

Valmiki's *Ramayana* is re-narrated or rewritten numerous times to subvert the authoritative practice representing Hindu dharma targeting women in particular. The peculiarity in Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* lies in giving a distinctive voice to the character of Ahalya, whose presence was negligible in the *Ramayana*. She is a mythological character whose prominence is never discussed and who does not find a voice in the epic. When Lord Rama inquired about a hermitage in a grove near Mithila, Vishwamitra told him the narrative of the great sage Gautama, who in a rage, cursed his wife Ahalya for having an adulterous relationship with Lord Indra by saying:

> You will reside here for many thousands of years. Subsisting on air and without food, you will torment yourself through austerities. You will sleep on ashes. You will live in this hermitage, unseen by all creatures. When the invincible Rama, Dasharatha's son, arrives in this terrible forest, you will be purified. O one who is evil in conduct! When he becomes your guest, you will lose your avarice and confusion. You will then regain your own form and find delight with me. [Debroy Chapter 1(47)]

The main objective of narrating her story was to lecture Ram on sexuality which serves as a warning. Mandakranta Bose observes that the episode reinforces the "dangerous and threatening nature of women… The message is clear: sexuality is pervasive in the adult world, in the control of women, and a threat to the male. Marriage is the culturally normative way to control women" (71). Thus, the story of Ahalya marks Vishwamitra's lessons to Lord Rama on sexuality and its repercussions on society.

Ahalya's Awakening is a re-visioning of Ahalya's story from the *Ramayana*,

giving voice to the unvoiced and silent woman who had to undergo penance for voicing her desires. It provides a fresh interpretation by narrating the story from her perspective and highlights the androcentric narration of the mythological texts. The narrative traces Ahalya's life from her childhood, presenting her unusual passion for learning, her ambitious nature, love, and marriage. Furthermore, it meticulously discusses the situations leading to her adultery, her husband's curse, and her refusal to accept another man's redemption. Reclaiming Ahalya's character reflecting on her narrative is done to refute the dominant narrative of the discriminatory representation of Ahalya in Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

In Valmiki's *Ramayana,* Ahalya is presented as a minor character. She is considered to be the first woman made by Brahma, and later on, she was given to Rishi Gautama. Her prominence does not rise from being a woman whose existence was only created to highlight the ability of men—the divinity of the protagonist Ram, and the ascetic power of her husband, Rishi Gautama. Furthermore, her story remains an exemplar to women throughout the ages to be aware of the consequences of infidelity and adultery. Throughout the epic narrative, she remains a peripheral figure without a voice who was victimised by the authority of male power. Can Ahalya speak? Does she have a voice? Does she have the right for pleasure and desire? Why is she not given space in Valmiki's *Ramayana*? These questions lead us to believe that the mythological narratives are traditionally men's narratives and exalted those women who did not resist the conventional rules attributed to them. Rewriting the traditional epics is significant to defy the elitist historiography which entrenched the highest Hindu philosophy pertaining to the rules and regulations to be followed.

The narrative begins with Menaka warning King Nahusha who has a secret desire for Sachi, wife of Indra Shakra's wife. Menaka informed King Nahusha of the downfall of Indra Shakra who seduced the wife of Rishi Gautam and indulged in adultery. Ahalya was born as the most beautiful girl to King Mudgal and his wife Nalayani. Considering her birth, she belongs to the upper middle class, was born as a princess and later married to a Brahmin (which ranked highest in the Brahmanical social order). From that point of view, she may not qualify to be studied as a subaltern. Situating Ahalya as a subaltern voice is done in the context of her being a woman in the patriarchal set-up and also in the Brahmanical social order, which encourages male power to dominate the women in society. The inclusion of women in the subaltern groups offers an opportunity to reanalyse what Dipesh Chakraborty called "minority histories" which refers to all those pasts in which "the democratically-minded histo-

rians have fought the exclusions and omissions of mainstream narratives of the nation" (473). They are "minority histories' because they are oppositional to the mainstream historical narratives (Chakraborty 473). The mainstream narrative mainly highlights the prominent characters like Sita from different perspectives. However, a character like Ahalya is used to drive a message of promiscuity and adultery, leaving a gap and fissure in the narrative structure.

Women are measured in terms of their physical beauty which becomes a status for them. To be admired and respected for beauty instead of the other traits has become a woman's identity. When Ahalya was born, her mother desperately wanted her to be associated with Indra. When Rishi Vashisht named her Ahalya, she was described as "the beautiful one without blemishes" (Kane 8). Symbolically, Ahalya means something more profound. As King Mudgal said, "Ahalya means the plough, too, when broken into two parts—a-halya, as related to ploughing" (8). Ahalya was adept at many things but was relegated to her brother's shadow. When she asked Rishi Vashisht, "Why is the earth called a mother and not a father?" Her vociferous voice shuddered the old-aged tradition which did not relent in any resistance (10). Valmiki's authoritative narrative has silenced, defeated and contained the voice of Ahalya by referring to her for sexual preference. While examining the androcentric narrative of the epics and the limited exploration of women characters and their roles, Uma Chakravarti in "Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in early India" writes, "If women have not been portrayed in a proper light, it is because of misogyny and chauvinism which made us all myopic and did not allow us to see these women for their enormous strength and conviction" (11).

Kane's Ahalya is strong, inquisitive, intelligent and stubborn. She prefers intelligence over beauty and often rebukes Indra when he expresses his deep admiration for her beauty. She was not easily beguiled. She did not want to be known as the most beautiful woman in the world. She says, "Besides beauty of the body, there is in woman beauty of the heart and beauty of the brain, too". And she continued, "But how many see that? Kindness is ignored and intelligence is dismissed. Most would not recognise or acknowledge the wisdom behind loveliness, the wit behind the appealing beauty of a woman?" (Kane 40). A man like Indra who is a trickster or seducer only sees the beautiful body but not the wisdom. Her emphasis on learning and knowledge instead of marriage showed her as a woman with a profound understanding of the importance of education. Another incident in which she rebelled against the societal norm was when she questioned the intention of Swayamwar when everyone in her

family wanted Indra to be her husband. She said: "I will have to be won. I am the prize trophy to be gifted to the winner of this senseless contest!" (113).

In Kane's rendition, Ahalya is portrayed as an unusual princess and she was attracted to Rishi Gautam's intellectualism and understanding who appreciated her reason rather than her physical beauty. However, a gradual change eventually became apparent after marriage and she was relegated to a traditional wife serving her husband. Following years of negligence by her husband due to his saintly duties, she submitted to the illusion of Indra's seduction and suffered the consequence of the sinful act. Towards the end, defying the original presentation in the epic, she questions Gautam who never acknowledged his contribution towards the act. She expresses her anguish at the discriminatory punishment meted out to women. Who is responsible for the crime? Whether it is Ahalya or God Indra. Wendy Doniger in "Sita and Helen, Ahalya and Alcmena" says:

> In *The Laws of Manu*, it is the man who is primarily punished for adultery, yet in the myths, adulterous women are often mutilated or killed. The woman is regarded as naturally responsible on the assumption that all women are seductive, just as all snakes bite; but the man is culturally responsible: knowing that all women are seductive, the male adulterer is at fault when a woman is allowed to do what she is naturally inclined to do. (37)

This crime and the later punishment of both Ahalya and Indra have consequences for the future history of humankind. As propagated by the Brahmanical laws, controlling female sexuality is considered a necessity in mythology. The suppression of women during ancient times and in the mythological narratives was practised through various cultural ideologies. One such practice was the strict disciplining of female sexuality, which gave rise to the establishment of the notion of womanhood depending on the concept of purity and chastity. A certain paradox is interweaved in the concept as women were both objectified and confined within moral rules on purity.

Bhagya Shree Nadamala and Priyanka Tripathi felt the need to revise the ancient epics with the subaltern theory to evaluate the intensity with which the epics imposed their patriarchal hegemony. They associated the andro-centric epic creation with neo-colonialist historiography. Accordingly, Ramayana which is considered:

> The principal text in making an ideal society (Indian nationalism), bestowing the authority to male protagonists and their Andro-centric narratives. It stands analogous to the neo-colonialists in crediting historiography solely to the British colonial rulers and institutions. The marginalised/oppressed/other 'Indian elites' were classified as a 'stimulus and response' to the colonialists (Centre/oppressors/self). Drawing the connecting line, the female characters in the *Ramayana* were either constructed to stimulate the war or held responsible for the major events, though not likely in the lives of male protagonists. (10488)

Ahalya was also held responsible for her unrestrained sexuality displayed in the absence of her husband and falling for the deception and illusion of Indra. In anti-colonial politics, the important thing was to recover the pre-modern or traditional in "imagining" the nation. In India, this pre-modern traditional culture translates into one of Brahmanical Hinduism (Banerjee 37). Thus, presenting the Hindu beliefs without any blemishes was important for nation-building and taming women was also necessary as they were the cultural keepers.

Ahalya always questions, "Do women need special laws?" (83). Even though Gautama believed that rules should deliver justice to both sexes, the disparity between men and women on the grounds of morality was also evident when the curse on Indra was later modified "after the other gods had begged Gautam. The thousand vulvas on his body had been replaced by a thousand eyes" (334-335). Indra remained a God, she was turned into a stone. She was cursed by one man and made to wait for redemption from another man. Ahalya as a woman is made to act as a catalyst in the display of male power. Doniger, in another book, *Hindu Myths* writes, "the female sex has never found favour with any of the world's religion, or with their priests and prophets" (11). Gautama's harsh reaction or the curse is still traditionally believed to be a justified act for her wrong actions.

Kane reflects on the humanistic portrayal of Ahalya's character—describing her emotions, passions and desires. Despite her wit, beauty and loveliness, she has flaws and commits mistakes. Her strength lies in the fact that she accepts her action and its consequences. She also points out her husband's fault, who cursed her for being an infidel wife and not himself for failing her. She asks Gautam, "And punish me for what? That I felt desire- a desire you, as my husband, could not perceive or satiate?" (323). Indra's instant effort to escape from the situation when Gautam caught

them made her realise the nature of Indra's love- it was all about his (man's) ego, which was hurt when she rejected him earlier and that there was no genuine affection. In the end, she alone would be condemned by society. Her rejection of society's unfair treatment made her resign to herself till she made her peace.

Kane denies the identification of Ahalya as an infidel wife of a rishi, whom her husband cursed for committing adultery. She questions the society's acceptance of such identification, "Was that her identity, circumscribed by that one mistake?" (331). She further asks, "Would anyone hear her anguished wail, her cry for justice? Would she be deemed the infidel for eternity?" (335). The author further exposes the fact that Ahalya is a character whom the men around her had exploited- Indra by his seduction in her most vulnerable moment, Gautam by failing her and cursing her for being an infidel. The notion of female subjugation which was further heightened by Ram's redemption of her, is alternated with self-redemption. She makes it Ahalya's own decision to wake up from her spiritual meditation. After being cursed by her husband, she struggles alone, is condemned by society, and is abandoned by her children. Disappointed at the unfairness of society, she turned to deep meditation. Kane describes, "She had made herself invisible to the condemning eyes of society…She found herself frozen into stone…in the hopeful quest that she would seek her sense of peace" (331- 332).

The counter-narrative rendered by Kane explores female desire which has been subdued. It emphasises that women can have desires and should not be a cultural restriction. In the novel, Ahalya saw through the illusion and knew that Indra was behind her husband's form, but Gautama's neglect and growing physical desire made her submit to the seduction. The novelist insists that she is "a normal woman with normal needs" (250). Feeling unwanted and unloved and frustrated at Gautam's total negligence of her existence and the sufferings she was going through; she fell in the hands of a man who seemingly had the same affection for her after all those years. The submission exemplifies her psychological distress which her husband chose to ignore. Her eventual submission to the marriage, compromising her ambition and passion, Gautam's hidden demand from her to be accepting of every situation despite her ambitions, passions and desires made her all the more vulnerable. The revered intellectual, who made laws to empower and emancipate women from subordination "could not cherish his wife and restricted her to home-keeping and legal subordination" (324). Throughout her life, a woman is constantly subjected to "imposed conformity" and "eternal expectations" (332).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this counter-narrative given by Kavita Kane endeavours to create a voice for the subaltern by giving life to Ahalya who was a silent sufferer of male hegemony in the authoritative text on Hindu Vedas. In defiance of her passive portrayal in the original epic, Ahalya is recreated with a voice that questions the system. She is exploited on account of her sexual desire which is a taboo in Indian tradition. Through the narrative of Ahalya, the author has given a distinctive difference by reflecting on the most neglected and marginalised woman character and retrieving her from her peripheral position in the epic.

Kavita Kane in her novel raises the pertinent question of why a character like Ahalya is significant in exposing the position of such subdued women who are used as instruments in the patriarchal society for the progression of men. Feminist retellings thus subvert the dominant ideology enshrined in the classical epic. She demystifies Ahalya's tale which was overlooked in the main story of more prominent characters. From a muted victim who silently suffered the curse meted out on her, she is recreated into one with the strength who accepted her actions and the consequences. Most importantly, Ahalya becomes one who controls her destiny and redeems herself from the male hegemony with her questioning of the rigid rules on women structured by society.

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