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KORAL DASGUPTA'S AHALYA: AN INTERPRETATION OF WOMANHOOD WITH
RESOLUTE VOICE

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Abstract

Myths play an important role not just in society but also in human psychology, as it is deeply rooted in society and culture. They are not only fascinating but also have universal appeal with mythological characters and stories that influence popular culture. Myths are pertinent to humankind's study because they help us answer fundamental questions about the purpose of existence. Thus, it can be said that myth, legend, and history created by the centres of power are not objective but rather political narratives under the control of dominance and dogma.

In *Ramayana*, the perspective of the voiceless and underrepresented women is explored in modern re-readings of epics. Every time a story is retold or rewritten, a fresh viewpoint emerges that emphasizes the diversity of these great epics and makes use of the myths to reflect on and explore societal truths, values, and assumptions. Thus, by emphasizing the treatment of women as objects of pleasure as posited by feminist theories, this paper tries to deconstruct the character of Ahalya, one of the 'Pancha Kanya' and wife of Maharishi Gautama who was cursed for her bodily desire, but who believed that "Ahalya can neither be possessed nor forsaken" (20) through Koral Dasgupta's *Ahalya*.

Keywords: Myth, Mythology, Ahalya, treatment, desire, voice

Myths are not only fascinating but also universal appeal. They serve as a rich, consistent and influential source of information on history and culture they are passed down from generations to generation through oral narrations and as bed time stories from older to younger generation.

K.K. Ruthven opines, "[Myths], are obscure in protean in form and ambiguous in meaning" [par. 1]. Epics all over the world have played a crucial role in making the myths timeless. Myth can mean anything from bedtime stories to rituals to

ideological statements. Myth also aids in enquiring basic questions about the meaning of human life and hence they are relevant in the study by mankind. Thus, one can say myth, legend, and history which are by the power centres are not neutral but political motivated narratives, controlled by domination and ideology.

William Bascom opines, "myths are prose narratives which in the society in which they are told are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past" (4). These narratives

through the storytelling of origins, roots, destinies of legends bring forth archetypes all over the world. They are all about the supernatural, dealing with Gods, Deities, demons, evil, and their powers. According to French literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes, "it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact" (143). Mythological characters and stories have fascinated and influenced popular culture. Myths play an important role not just in society but also in human psychology, as it is deeply rooted in society and culture. When one studies mythology, it is imperative to look into the association between mythology and archetypes. Archetype is a term coined by Carl Jung. It is an abstract idea of a class or things that represent the most typical essential characteristics shared by a class. Archetypes can be expressed subjectively. Jung uses this term to explain his theory of the collective unconscious. The collective unconscious dominates the activities of life; it is the psychic residue of our ancestral experience. Archetype refers to the universal symbols, themes, images, and characters that are recurring and are found across the literature. According to Philip Wheelwright, "The significance of a myth is to show the relationship between archetypes and archetypal patterns that may be reflected in legend, folklore, and ideology concerning the cultural environments in which they grow" (149). One of the most powerful archetypes is "the hero". The archetypal hero is found in mythologies, religions, and epics. This hero archetype symbolizes transformation and redemption. The relationship between myth and culture is not only important but also interesting for analysis as it is through myths one can comprehend the complex web of culture.

Epics are narratives that relay mythology in an expressive and elevated manner of grandeur and heroism. These epics hold the philosophical and spiritual teachings of life, just as C. Rajagopalachari asserts, "Mythology is an integral part of religion. It is as necessary for religion and national culture as the skin and the skeleton that preserve a fruit with its juice and its taste" (xiii). In India, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are the two epics that teach spiritual and ethical lessons: *Ramayana* speaks about life

being a full circle, and *Mahabharata* highlights the essence of never turning back to the past.

In *Ramayana*, the union of Rama and Sita is constituted as the ideal model for a Hindu marriage. Thus, Rama is the 'Maryada Purushottam', and Sita is projected as the ideal of womanhood, the perfect role model as a partner and mother. The notion of divine feminine along with grace, tenderness, and fragility is enforced upon them through the ideal woman, Sita. She in *Ramayana* is epitomized as the ideal woman and devoted wife, where she was a subordinate. Since the later Vedic Age, a woman's position was discriminated against in education and other rights, and polygamy further deteriorated her position.

The contemporary re-readings of epics explore the voice of the voiceless and underrepresented women in *Ramayana*. Each retelling and rewriting bring out the renewed perspective which highlights the plurality of these great epics and uses the myths to introspect and question certain beliefs, values and truths of the society. Oral narration is an intrinsic feature of ancient epics of the world. Each narrator adds flavor to it with his/her views, interpretation and ideology. Thus, through Koral Dasgupta's *Ahalya*, this paper attempts to deconstruct the character of Ahalya, one of the 'Pancha Kanya' and wife of Maharishi Gautama who was cursed for her bodily desire by highlighting the treatment of woman as an object of pleasure as postulated by the feminist theories and thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Mahashweta Devi.

Ahalya is one such woman in the metanarrative *Ramayana*. In *Ramayana*, she is mentioned twice- in *Bala Kanda* and *Uttar Kanda*, and in *Mahabharata* too she is mentioned twice. Her identity is that, that she is the wife of the great rishi Gautama and she was seduced by Lord Indra for which she was cursed to turn into a stone to be revived after many years of long penance by the pious, kind, and benevolent Lord Rama. Ahalya, the name in Sanskrit suggests 'the one who is unploughed'; in *Uttar Kanda*, it is known as 'the one without the reprehension of ugliness'. She is also known as 'ayonijasambhava'- the one not born of a

woman as Lord Brahma created her. In Valmiki *Ramayana*, Ahalya is not cursed to become a stone as the popular belief goes. However, she is invisible to the world, surviving on air, she just ceases to exist for anyone.

A.K. Ramanujan, in his famous essay, "Three Hundred *Ramayanas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" speaks about the differences between Valmiki's portrayal of Ahalya and that of Kamban's. He mentions, "In Valmiki, Indra seduces a willing Ahalya. In Kamban's narrative, Ahalya realizes she is doing wrong but cannot let go of the forbidden joy" (31). Ahalya, is hailed as one of the 'Panch Kanyas' because of her nobility of her character, her beauty and her purity. The questions that arise then are why Ahalya was even punished to become a stone as *Padma Purana* states or became invisible to the world as suggested in Valmiki's *Ramayana*? Didn't she have a right to her physical (bodily) demands as a human? Was she cursed because she was a woman and Indra's curse was turned into a boon that the Lord of the Gods became the thousand-eyed, but Ahalya became lifeless? She chose something which she felt was appropriate, which well suited her independent nature. However, with the curse and stigma of social ostracism, she remained muted and was rendered voiceless throughout the meta-narratives and also the retellings of *Ramayana*. In the male-centric world, her identity and story are perceived from the lens of patriarchy and she is the 'other' who was completely silenced and cursed to be a 'stone', symbolically, dead without any agency or voice. Gerda Lerner opines:

Women live their social existence within the general culture. Whenever they are confined by patriarchal restraint or segregation into separateness (which always has subordination as its purpose), they transform this restraint into complementarity and redefine it. Thus, women live a duality- as members of the general culture and as partakers of woman's culture (242).

Perhaps, Ahalya is one of the initial advocates of women's culture in the male-

dominated society. She is a minor character in the 'itihasa,' but she is stigmatized and disliked in all the narratives. The very purpose of bringing her story up is to tell women, especially that women must be punished if they try to break away from the social norms. According to Meena Kelkar, 'Ahalya's story in the scriptures and her punishment serves as a warning and deterrent to women' (60).

Ahalya in Koral Dasgupta's text by the same name, is created as a piece of art by Brahma, her creator, who is her father. She is created with patience and with exceptional beauty, till then is 'just a soul' which is not grounded:

Father was crafting me, slowly, scattering flakes of sandalwood all around. Steady hands were carving the designs with confidence [...] The face seemed as notorious as the Rain, the body voluptuous like the River, and the dense and overpowering hair like the Mist! Strong eyebrows, broad forehead and a small chin on an oval face, with eyes closed [...] Brahma stood erect and poured honey from a barrel [...] then made its way downwards, glistening the crust and adding a brownish tinge with its golden viscosity. He dragged a huge basket from the other end of the cave. In it freshly plucked marigolds and jasmines sparkled like stars, their natural delight energizing the gloomy silence inside the cave. With enormous patience Brahma covered the honey-washed body with these flowers, the yellow and white petals sticking to the skin like a rich amorphous cover (13).

Patriarchal society upheld the institution of marriage with prime importance, and she is forced into marriage. Oblivious of the responsibility marriage begets, Ahalya, here, lacked the strength to protest when Brahma glorifies Sage Gautam who gets tempted and allured by her 'bodily beauty'. Brahma and Gautam, both being male, disguise this temptation under the social institution of marriage. Brahma states, "Having led a life of renunciation for all these years it would have been far more tempting for him to behold you like a lover and indulge in

physical pleasures, especially when you were willing to be taken [...] Pleased with his restraints I have given him as my blessings your hand in marriage" (45). Ahalya is not asked for her opinion and is treated as a trophy to be given to someone. The patriarchal dominance assigns her an identity and she remain as a non-cerebral figure that needs protection. This underscores the remark made by Gayatri Spivak in her seminal work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that,

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in the insurgency or the ground rules of the sexual division of labour, both of which there is 'evidence.' It is, rather, that, both as an object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow (287).

Ahalya in Koral Dasgupta's *Ahalya*, was committed to her husband in mind, body and soul. She paints and decorates his house, accompanies and supports him in his healing services to people, she adheres to all her duties as a wife. She longs for his touch, his companionship. And one fine evening when she completely surrenders herself to Gautam, her lover, her husband she is labelled as "Disaster" (90). Ahalya copulated with Indra, who came in the disguise of Gautam tricking Ahalya and using her and her body to avenge Gautam.

This momentary lapse labels her as an adulterous wife. Gautama accuses and curses her. He remarks, "You stripped me of my consciousness; you would be left here alone, ripped apart from your senses. Like a stone you will lie on the hard earth, inert and dormant. Lifelessly you would have to wait here watching the world, unable to react" (96). Ahalya, in this retelling, is true to herself, and she takes responsibility for her actions without blaming anyone. She says, "[t]aken aback by the undeserving curse I stared at Gautam with deep shock. But then

what was so shocking? Hasn't power always made its best attempt to uproot voices?" (96). She is honest to the core. Ahalya reveals her inner strength and her graceful acceptance of the punishment rendered to her speaks volumes of her resilience. "Since the limitation of a man is always explained as the failure of his woman, I too stood there bearing the consequences, discarded and disowned like a barren rock, observing much more than what I did till a while back but feeling nothing! No anger, no hatred, no disgrace, no hurt" (101).

When Viswamitra asks Rama to enter Ahalya's hermitage along with Lakshmana, Ahalya's penance ends. Both the brothers touch her feet and Rama becomes the agent of her redemption. Her self-respect and status are restored in the society when Rama touches her feet to seek her blessings. Ahalya asserts that "[t]he innocence of my longing, the stubborn desire, the commitment in my call of love. The overpowering *indriyas*. The romance of Indra. The resistance, indulgence and withdrawal of Gautam. In one blink Rama would witness it all" (106). She grows indifferent towards forgetting or forgiving Gautam and accepts to perceive a response. She affirms, "[w]ith all burdens shed on the ever-accepting Mother Earth I would start my reverse journey back to Heaven" (107).

In conclusion, Koral Dasgupta's *Ahalya* is that one hero who evolved through a painful growth- from a beautiful creation to a celebrated seer's wife to a life-less entity and then worshipped as a pious soul to be revered by the Hindu married women making her a resolute voice.

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