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A Mythopoeic Interpretation of Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening*

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Abstract

*Myths are ancient stories that were created by early civilizations to make sense of things happening in the natural world around them. They serve as a connecting cord between the past and the present. Even though the stories are ancient, they're still considered important today as they represent a country's culture and legacy. Many writers of the present age rewrite mythical stories giving them a different shade and perspective, keeping the old story as the base. By doing so, they create their own myths which in other words can be termed as mythopoeia or myth-making. Keeping the original characters from the tales, the writers revise and reproduce the stories in a new dimension and fictionalize mythology so that it appeals to the modern age. One such writer is Kavita Kane who writes novels in feminist perspectives and gives importance to the minor female characters in mythology. Her novel *Ahalya's Awakening* has many mythopoeic elements like reinterpretation of the stone curse, giving voice to the voiceless, giving importance to *Ahalya's* personal desires and intellectual aspirations and critiquing the patriarchal society. This paper intends to interpret Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* through the lens of Mythopoeia.*

Keywords: Mythopoeia, Reinterpretation, Feminist Perspective

'Myth' comes from the ancient Greek word 'mýthos' which in turn means 'speech, narrative, fiction, or plot'. It is combined with the suffix 'logia' to mean 'study' which derives the word 'Mythology' meaning 'fiction or story-telling'. A myth connects the past and the present. Through the use of myths, a writer shows the continuity and universality of human feelings and emotions, their deeds and misdeeds. Mythology is connected with the development and evolution of traditional stories from varied cultures that explains the Universe, human nature, and societal norms. These stories are deeply rooted in the collective experiences, beliefs, and values of people of different cultures. Myths were created by early humans to explain natural phenomena such as the sun, moon, stars, weather, and natural disasters. These myths helped them understand the world around them. Myths also explain how the world and humanity came into existence. These stories often involve gods, goddesses, supernatural beings, primordial beings, or cosmic events. These figures embody cultural values of a specific community or country and serve as moral exemplars or cautionary tales.

Before the advent of writing, myths were passed down orally from generation to generation. It was a genre of folklore in the past where storytellers played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting these stories, often adapting them to reflect contemporary values and knowledge. Myths

promote social cohesion by providing a shared narrative that unites members of a community. They help establish common values, norms, and traditions. It helps to convey moral and ethical lessons and teaches appropriate behavior. In psychological view, Carl Jung's theory of archetypes suggests that myths reflect universal symbols and themes that reside in the collective unconscious of all humans. These archetypes appear across different cultures and times. Sigmund Freud viewed myths as expressions of repressed desires and fears, particularly those related to family dynamics and sexuality. Like the myths that were passed down orally, at present, traditional myths were given new dimensions and are being presented to the modern generation in a way that it appeals to them. By doing so, the writers not only spread the traditional stories but also present them in a modern point of view like Amish Tripathi's portrayal of Shiva as a human and Kavita Kane bringing into limelight, the lesser known women characters from mythology. By doing this they create their own mythology which in other words can be called as mythopoeia or creating myths. By focusing on traditional tales and presenting it in a different lens the writers use literature as a cultural archive where our country's culture is preserved well, is not lost and also reaches the younger generation. This paper aims to interpret Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* through the lens of Mythopoeia.

Mythopoeia or **mythopoesis**, is the act of creating mythology. It is a subgenre of speculative fiction, and a theme in modern literature and film, where an artificial or fictionalized mythology is created by a writer of prose, poetry, or other literary forms. This category interprets, revises, and reproduces extinct pre-religious myths and extant incredible myths, in an attempt at redemption or restoration. The concept was widely popularized by J. R. R. Tolkien in the 1930s; for Tolkien, mythopoeia is the highest form of art, as it allows man to create a new, meaningful reality that reflects the ultimate truth. The authors in this genre integrate traditional mythological themes and archetypes into fiction. Mythopoeia has become a modern narrative technique in Literature that creates or rewrites the myth. 'Mythopoeia' stems from the Greek words "mythos" meaning myth and "poeisis" for acting as well as creating. Some of the finest writers of the world like Margaret Atwood, Chinua Achebe, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Girish Karnad, Shashi Deshpande, Amish Tripathi retold the myths, recreated new feminine myths and disrupted the hierarchy of patriarchal narratives.

Mythopoeia is sometimes called artificial mythology. In popular discourse it is a vague term which is sometimes called mythopoesis, mythopoetic or mythopoeic. Mythopoeia is used to describe any fiction or film that builds fantastic worlds similar or different from our own, which invents or recycles mythical archetypes and which creates stories of a primordial past. Lately there has been a surge in Indian mythological writers like Amish Tripathi, Ananth Neelakantan, Kavita Kane, Devdutt Pattanaik, Ashwin Sanghi and many others who give a twist to traditional mythological stories. In other words it can be inferred that they are making myths that appeal to the modern generation of young readers. Amish's Shiva trilogy, Kavita Kane's works and many modern mythological writers' works deal with the traditional mythological tales in varied perspectives. In Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening*, the novelist not only gives voice to Ahalya but also presents her as a woman who goes against the patriarchal norms. As Ahalya was known all along as a symbol of infidelity, this work gives justice to her emotional void which drove her to make the biggest mistake of her life.

Ahalya is a well-known character in the epic Ramayana, one of the major epics of ancient India. She was the wife of the sage Gautama Maharishi. She is an exceptionally beautiful and virtuous woman. Her name means the 'one who is without impurities' or 'untainted'. She is considered as an ideal wife and a symbol of purity. Her traditional story represents the consequences of infidelity, the power of the divine and forgiveness.

In the traditional mythological story, Ahalya was Brahma's prized creation, the most beautiful woman. He named her Ahalya meaning "unblemished" and "flawless" signifying purity and natural beauty. Brahma sent her to sage Gautham's hermitage in order to stop her from being coveted by Lord Indra. Sage Gautham returns her to Brahma after she grows up; pleased with sage's asceticism, Brahma bestows Ahalya upon him

as his wife. This triggers Lord Indra. He disguises himself as sage Gautham and unites with her. During that time sage Gautham comes in, finds the disguised Indra and Ahalya together and punishes them by cursing Indra to be covered in a thousand female genital like ulcers and Ahalya to be turned into stone. As they beg for his forgiveness, he grants Ahalya a boon that she would be released from her stone when the sacred feet of the son of Ayodhya (Lord Rama) touches her. He also reduces Indra's curse that he should be covered in a thousand eyes. Centuries later, Lord Rama, on his way to Mithila passes through sage Gautham's hermitage where the dust from his feet touches the stone that is Ahalya. The curse is broken and Ahalya returns to her human form. Lord Rama touches her feet, proclaiming her innocence. Gautama is moved when he hears Lord Rama's proclamation and takes her back as his wife. Ahalya is thus freed by Lord Rama.

In Kavita Kane's novel, several happenings can be interpreted through the lens of mythopoeia. Initially, Kavita Kane's novel subverts the story by presenting Ahalya as an intelligent, aspiring rishika whose ambition for education and intellectual partnership is thwarted by the patriarchal society. The novel employs mythopoeia to give Ahalya a voice and narrative agency, contrasting sharply with the original epic where she is a passive victim and a 'mute spectator to her own tragedy'. In the novel, she is not presented as a passive character but as a talkative, knowledgeable woman who discusses everything with sage Gautham. Princess Ahalya was a studious student and was educated in the palace but she wants to learn more. As a woman, she is not allowed to join any ashram as a student, but as war ensues she was left in sage Gautam's hermitage by her parents, stating that she will be pursuing her higher studies there. In the hermitage she feels happy and excited, learns a lot and involves herself in the daily chores of the ashram. When Ahalya meets Rishi Gautam for the first time, she was immediately attracted by the raw pulsating energy and divine aura that emanates from him. She also finds him more knowledgeable than all the Rishis she had met so far. Before her entry into Gautham's hermitage, she refuses to marry Lord Indra since she is not interested in his behavior. Sage Vashishta, who was teaching Ahalya and her brother Divodas finds her to be too smart and intelligent as a woman,

"Ahalya was far more intelligent than her brother. The girl was brilliant, and she displayed that brilliance quietly, as was her nature, but Vashishta wondered whether her parents would be able to handle her extraordinariness". (AA 11)

When Ahalya is sent to Rishi Gautam's ashram to pursue her higher education, she continues asking many curious questions to him. Ahalya falls in love with Gautam because of his deep knowledge and spiritual prowess. Rishi Gautham also reciprocates her feelings as he too is attracted towards her intellect, her desire to learn more and the involvement she shows towards studies and her responsibility in taking care of the ashram and disciples. During a conversation with sage Gautham, Ahalya also proves that she has vast knowledge about the ancient sages, their families and lifestyle.

In the traditional story Ahalya is presented as a voiceless, unsung, unheard and unreciprocated character. But Kavita Kane's novel is in first-person narrative, allowing Ahalya to tell her own story, voice out her own thoughts and be vocal and known. This narrative choice transforms her character from a minor, silent character into a complex protagonist with her own desires, struggles, and self-awareness. Ahalya was always ready to discuss many topics and eager to get any information from her guru. She never fails to use any opportunity she gets to acquire intellectual information. She even questions Gautham why he had not yet married, even though she knows that he was vowed into celibacy. Once when they were discussing about extra marital relationships, Ahalya was shocked to find out that rishi Gautham supports it by saying that some rishi's wife was very straightforward and honest in voicing out her thoughts about having an affair. Here, Ahalya gets angry and upset and says she cannot accept his answer. She questions the sacred bond of marriage and moral virtues between a husband and wife. This clearly shows how the character Ahalya is vocal in voicing out her thoughts to sage Gautham in the novel.

In the novel the writer shifts the focus from moral supervision of female sexuality to an exploration of Ahalya's longings, desires, and internal struggles as a woman constrained by patriarchal norms. Her

'awakening' is an internal journey towards self-realization and reclaiming her identity outside the confines of her prescribed role as a wife. When Ahalya was pregnant with their third child, sage Gautam gets irritated often as he has been away from his spiritual path for too long. So he begins spending time on reading and writing books and wants to revisit his spiritual path. Unfortunately this makes Ahalya lonely and she wants to be close to Gautham as they were before. Initially this separation is not much noticed by Ahalya, but later on, she feels lonesome. She misses their lovable conversations and the chitchats between them are all forgotten in due course. This loneliness and separation makes her fall for Indra. As she resides in the secluded hermitage with Gautam, she easily becomes Indra's target. The alluring aura which lingers around her, the secluded nature, where the hermitage was situated kindles his temptation. Indra, approaches her in the absence of Gautam, confirming that her husband was not there and seeks to satisfy his longing. Ahalya finds out who he was but she was too desperate in need of physical satisfaction since Gautam neglected her. At first sight, she mistakes him to be Gautam and allows him to hug her. Instantly she finds out it is not her husband but demands him to come to her as Gautam after finding out it was Indra, which he readily accepts. When Gautam witnesses both of them together he curses her by saying

'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, Ahalya... In that quest you shall receive your salvation- the deliverance you searched for all these years' (AA 328)

While the traditional narrative portrays her actions as a form of betrayal, Kavitha Kane insists the readers to consider an alternative perspective that delves into the complexities of human emotions. In a moment of weakness and temptation, she succumbed to Indra's advances. Some points can be considered which made Ahalya go wrong. As she resided in a secluded hermitage with Gautam, Ahalya often experiences loneliness and isolation. This causes a sense of emotional void and longing in her. And naturally when Indra comes, Ahalya is drawn towards him. Despite her virtue and devotion, the sudden and unexpected arrival of Indra, combined with her own vulnerabilities, caused her weakness.

In the traditional myth, Ahalya is cursed by her husband, Rishi Gautam, to be turned into a stone for her perceived infidelity. Kane deconstructs this and reimagines, the "stone" state is Ahalya's own symbolic act of resistance and self-imposed solitude to seek enlightenment and understand her own identity, rather than a punishment inflicted by her husband. Gautham also realizes that the mistake happened because of his own avoidance. When Ahalya thinks that she will be punished, Gautam leaves her saying that he cannot hurt her since he loved her too much.. Ahalya feels guilty and sits in meditation regretting her act of infidelity, without food, water and ever not caring about her body and the world around her. She later becomes stone like without any emotions or feelings. She regrets how a momentary weakness has caused her downfall and condemned her to eternity. Stripped of pride, love, lust and longing, she watches the world go by as the wheels of her life were whirring slowly in her state of oblivion. At that moment, Ahalya realizes that she had been exploited by the two men and self-inflicted her immobility.

Ahalya soon realised that she has been exploited by these two men: Gautam in his righteous neglect and Indra in his obsessive lust. (AA 334)

After the realization she decides that she will never accept her redemption from a man and she will never wake into such a world. She herself would decide when to wake up, when to live again and when to breathe. Her redemption at the touch of Ram is portrayed as Ahalya's decision to come back to life at the sight of unjudgmental individuals like Ram and Vishwamitra, who unlike others do not condemn or perceive her as an adultress. The narrative also uses the mythical framework to assess the gender politics of the original story and contemporary society. It highlights the double standards where the male figures (Indra, Gautam) are often pardoned or given agency, while Ahalya is silenced and shamed.

Through the mythopoeic perspective, Ahalya is transformed from a minor, cursed character into a powerful symbol of resilience, personal growth, and empowerment, making her story relevant to contemporary discussions on gender equality and female voices. She was alone and was with herself. And when her guilt

and remorse were torn asunder, she starts up again, trembling with relief and recovers the warmth flowing through her once more.

In Kavita Kane's novel, *Ahalya's Awakening*, mythopoeic elements are used to redefine and overturn the traditional Ahalya myth from the Ramayana, focusing on female agency, self-discovery, and a modern perspective on justice. By focusing on these aspects the novelist creates her own myth keeping the traditional story as a base. As a result the once voiceless character gets her own voice and identity. By presenting the story in different dimensions the writer not only brings the traditional story to the young readers of today but also gathers their interests by focusing on different parts of the story which were neglected in the traditional narration. Though traditional mythological tales are modernized, retold and rewritten the cultural significance of those tales stands strong guiding the youngsters of the present generation. In this regard, it can be surmised that literature is used as a cultural archive to preserve our country's legacy.

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