

The Evolution of Selfhood in Kavita Kane's Ahalya's Awakening

Jerlin Flower S^{*1}, Dr. N. Sowmia Kumar²

Research Scholar PG & Research Department of English H.H The Rajah's College (Autonomous) Pudukottai-622001

Email: jerlin.flower@yahoo.com

Assistant Professor PG & Research Department of English H.H The Rajah's College (Autonomous) Pudukottai-622001

Email: sowmiakumar70@gmail.com

Abstract:

Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* offers a feminist reinterpretation of the Ahalya myth by transforming a traditionally silenced figure into a self-aware woman who reclaims her identity. This paper examines the evolution of Ahalya's selfhood through feminist literary criticism and contemporary myth retelling. Unlike the conventional Ramayana, Kane portrays Ahalya as an intelligent and emotionally complex woman whose identity is shaped by knowledge, emotional neglect, betrayal and self-realisation. The study analyses how patriarchal structures restrict her aspirations, how her marriage erodes her individuality and how her transformation into stone symbolises introspection rather than punishment. The paper argues that Kane redefines the myth as a narrative of resilience, autonomy and female empowerment, presenting Ahalya's journey as a powerful assertion of identity and personal freedom.

Keywords: selfhood, Identity, Empowerment, Myth, Patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* is a contemporary reinterpretation of the Ramayana that gives a new identity to Ahalya, a character who has traditionally been remembered only for her alleged infidelity. Instead of presenting Ahalya as a silent and sinful woman, Kane portrays her as an intelligent, ambitious and emotionally complex individual. The novel shifts the focus from punishment to self-discovery, showing how Ahalya evolves into a woman who understands her own worth and makes her own choices.

Kane reimagines Ahalya as an intelligent and ambitious princess whose identity is shaped by her pursuit of knowledge rather than her physical beauty. Unlike the traditional Ramayana, which introduces Ahalya through her marriage to Sage Gautama, Kane traces her childhood as the daughter of King Mudagal and Queen Nalayani of Panchala and the twin sister of Divodas. From an early age, Ahalya aspires to become a Rishika, revealing her desire to build an identity through learning rather than marriage. While studying under Sage Vashishth, Ahalya's exceptional intellect surpasses that of her brother. Recognising her brilliance, Vashishth remarks, "Ahalya was far more intelligent than her brother. The girl was brilliant and she displayed that brilliance quietly, as was her nature, but Vashishth wondered whether her parents would be able to handle her extraordinariness" (11). Later, at Sage Gautama's Ashram, she continues to excel through her curiosity, philosophical inquiries and extensive knowledge of ancient sages, earning Gautama's admiration. Despite her academic excellence, Ahalya's parents prioritise marriage over education. Determined to emulate learned women such as Gargi and Maitreyi, she wishes to continue her studies, but her aspirations are dismissed in favour of securing a prestigious marriage alliance. As Gerda Lerner observes in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, "Women's education has historically been limited not because of a lack of ability but because patriarchal societies have defined women's primary function as wife and mother rather than as autonomous intellectual beings" (283). Nalayani's preference for Indra's proposal further reflects patriarchal values that privilege status over a woman's intellectual ambitions, while Ahalya remains steadfast in her pursuit of knowledge and selfhood. Ahalya refuses to abandon her dream of becoming a scholar. At Gautama's Ashram, she finds an environment that nurtures intellectual inquiry and encourages independent thought. Gautama is drawn to Ahalya not merely for her beauty but for her intelligence, curiosity and love of learning. Reflecting on his feelings, he questions, "Was Ahalya the one for him? Or.

more importantly, was he the one for her?" (134). Rather than assuming a right over her, he respects her freedom and happiness, embodying Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* that "Authentic love ought to be founded on the mutual recognition of two liberties" (78). Their marriage thus represents an intellectual partnership based on equality and mutual respect rather than conventional patriarchal expectations.

Ahalya's decision to marry Gautama instead of Indra is a significant assertion of her freewill. She chooses intellectual companionship over power and status, demonstrating her determination to shape her own future. As Martha C. Nussbaum observes in *Women and Human Development*, "The central human capabilities are opportunities to choose and to act" (78). Ahalya's choice reflects this capability and marks an important step in the development of her selfhood.

In contrast, Indra is unable to accept her rejection. Viewing it as a personal insult, he warns Gautama, "A war is never won until the last battle" (129). His obsession reveals that his desire for Ahalya stems less from love than from wounded pride and possessiveness. Kane notes, "In an anguished frenzy, he had turned to Sachi; rushing into her waiting arms the day Ahalya publicly rejected him in the royal hall" (235). His response exposes the patriarchal belief that men are entitled to women's acceptance. As Pierre Bourdieu argues in *Masculine Domination*, "Masculine domination is so deeply rooted in our unconscious and in our institutions as to need no justification" (9). Indra's inability to respect Ahalya's decision reflects this patriarchal mindset, where female autonomy is perceived as a challenge to male authority.

The first signs of disappointment in Ahalya's married life emerge when Gautama gradually withdraws his attention from her. As he becomes absorbed in establishing Ashrams, teaching disciples and composing sacred texts, the intellectual companionship that once defined their relationship begins to disappear. More than her husband's absence, Ahalya mourns the loss of her identity as a learner. Hoping to resume her studies, she asks Gautama to teach her again, but he replies, "You require the rest now that there are four children to look after" (245). His response reflects the patriarchal expectation that a woman's primary role is motherhood rather than intellectual growth. Hurt by his refusal, Ahalya asks, "Does this mean you won't teach me? Again?" (245). Kane suggests that the erosion of a woman's selfhood often begins through the gradual neglect of her aspirations rather than direct oppression. As Gerda Lerner observes in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, "The system of patriarchy can function only with the cooperation of women" (217) which shows how patriarchal structures restrict women's access to knowledge and self-development.

The emotional distance between Ahalya and Gautama soon extends into their personal life. Gautama's constant absence leaves Ahalya lonely and emotionally neglected. When she seeks intimacy, he simply replies, "I am tired, Ahalya" (268), leaving her feeling rejected and isolated. Unable to suppress her disappointment, she confronts him, saying, "I am saying you noticed you have a wife who is morose, moody and miserable – and yet you neglected me!" (269). Yet Gautama prioritises spiritual pursuits over emotional companionship and fails to recognise her need for affection, understanding and intellectual partnership. As Carol Gilligan argues in *In a Different Voice*, "The failure of connection is the central problem in women's development" (171). Ahalya's growing loneliness reflects not merely marital dissatisfaction but the gradual fragmentation of her identity caused by emotional neglect and the denial of meaningful companionship.

A significant aspect of Kane's retelling is her honest portrayal of female desire. Unlike traditional versions of the Ramayana, which depict Ahalya primarily as a sinner or victim, Kane presents her as a woman with natural emotional and sexual needs. After the birth of their third child, Gautama withdraws from their marital relationship, leaving Ahalya feeling rejected and invisible. Acknowledging that she is "a normal woman with normal needs" (250), she confronts Gautama, saying, "We haven't made love since Anjani was born . . . When will this be over?" (202). Her words express not merely physical desire but a longing for emotional intimacy, companionship and recognition. Kane suggests that a successful marriage depends on mutual understanding and emotional connection and when these are absent, relationships gradually disintegrate. Ahalya eventually realises, "He was everyone's guru but hers . . . He was her husband, but no longer her guru, no longer her guide, no longer her friend, no longer her lover" (300). This marks the complete breakdown of a relationship once founded on shared learning and mutual respect. As Jessica Benjamin observes in *The Bonds of Love*, "To be recognized is to know that one's inner experience has reality and value for another person" (88). Ahalya's deepest suffering arises not from physical deprivation alone but from Gautama's failure to acknowledge her emotional needs and individuality.

As Ahalya's loneliness deepens, she begins to think of Indra again. Kane presents this not as moral weakness but as the consequence of prolonged emotional neglect. When Indra tells her, "You are beautiful! Oh-so beautiful" (311) she is deeply moved because she has long been denied affection and appreciation by her husband. Rather than glorifying adultery, Kane exposes the emotional emptiness within Ahalya's marriage.

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Significantly, Ahalya later admits that she recognised Indra despite his disguise and accepts responsibility for her actions instead of claiming deception. Her decision emerges from years of loneliness and emotional abandonment rather than mere passion. As Erich Fromm argues in *The Art of Loving*, "Love is not primarily a relationship to a specific person; it is an attitude, an orientation of character" (44). Kane thus shifts the focus from moral judgement to the emotional realities of marriage, inviting readers to question the patriarchal structures that ignore women's emotional and psychological needs.

More importantly, Ahalya confronts Gautama and questions his failure as a husband, reminding him that marriage should be founded on mutual love, respect and companionship rather than duty alone. Acknowledging her own imperfections, she states, "I am not an infallible being" (231), reflecting her willingness to accept responsibility for her actions instead of allowing others to define her identity. Kane portrays this honesty as a crucial step in Ahalya's evolving selfhood. Gautama, in turn, recognises his own failures and admits, "Like other men, I treated you not as a wife but as most men treat most women. . . . I could not cherish my wife" (231). His confession reveals that patriarchal values led him to suppress Ahalya's individuality and reduce her to domestic responsibilities. As bell hooks argues in *All About Love*, "Love cannot exist in any relationship that is based on domination and coercion" (38) which shows that Gautama's failure stems from patriarchal domination rather than genuine partnership.

When Gautama discovers Ahalya and Indra together, he curses her: "May you remain invisible to the human eye . . . till the time you receive your blessing, your enlightenment" (328). Kane interprets this punishment as a reflection of patriarchal double standards. Although Gautama acknowledges his own mistakes, Ahalya alone bears the harsh consequences, while Indra largely escapes punishment because of his male privilege. Her transformation into stone symbolises the silencing and social exclusion imposed upon women who challenge patriarchal norms. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, "The female voice has been repeatedly silenced in literary tradition" (17). Kane challenges this tradition by allowing Ahalya to voice her experiences instead of remaining a passive symbol of sin. The culmination of Ahalya's selfhood comes when she recognises the forces behind her suffering: "Ahalya soon realised that she has been exploited by these two men: Gautam in his righteous neglect and Indra in his obsessive lust" (334). This realisation enables her to reject both the identities of sinner and victim. She understands that Gautama denied her emotional and intellectual fulfilment, while Indra reduced her to an object of desire. Kane redefines Ahalya as a woman who critically confronts patriarchal oppression and ultimately reconstructs her identity on her own terms.

Unlike the traditional Ramayana, where Ahalya's redemption depends on Rama's divine touch, Kane shifts the focus from external salvation to inner awakening. While Rama removes the physical curse, Ahalya's true liberation has already occurred through years of reflection and spiritual growth, making self-realisation and not male intervention the source of her redemption. After the curse is lifted, Gautama asks Ahalya to return with him, but she refuses. Her decision marks the culmination of her transformed selfhood. No longer defining herself solely as a daughter, wife, or mother, she chooses independence and self-determination. As Sara Ahmed states in *Living a Feminist Life*, "A feminist life is a life that is lived in pursuit of freedom" (2). Ahalya's choice reflects this pursuit, demonstrating that her identity is no longer governed by patriarchal authority.

Kane further challenges patriarchal morality by introducing an imagined meeting between Ahalya and Sita. Ahalya questions why Sita, despite her innocence, must undergo the trial by fire, exposing the double standards that judge women by ideals of chastity while excusing men. As Judith Lorber observes in *Paradoxes of Gender*, "Gender is a major social status that organizes people's lives" (13). Through Ahalya and Sita, Kane critiques the patriarchal values that regulate female honour and purity.

Kane also redefines purity as self-awareness rather than sexual chastity. Ahalya realises that her greatest mistake was allowing others to shape her identity. Through meditation and introspection, she reconnects with her authentic self and attains psychological and spiritual rebirth. As Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes in *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, "The doors to the wild 'Self' are few but precious" (4). By the novel's end, Ahalya is no longer remembered as the cursed woman but as one who understands herself, accepts responsibility for her choices and rejects patriarchal definitions of womanhood. Kane thus transforms Ahalya into a powerful symbol of self-realisation, resilience and female empowerment.

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