



SUBVERTING MYTH: VOICE, AGENCY, AND RESISTANCE IN KAVITA

KANE'S AHALYA'S AWAKENING

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Abstract:

Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) offers a compelling feminist reinterpretation of one of the most silenced women in the *Ramayana*, transforming Ahalya from a passive victim of patriarchal judgment into an autonomous individual who challenges the social, moral, and religious structures that define her existence. This paper examines the novel through the interconnected concepts of voice, agency, and resistance, arguing that Kane subverts the traditional myth by reclaiming Ahalya's subjectivity and repositioning her as an active narrator of her own life. Drawing upon feminist literary criticism, myth revisionism, and poststructuralist notions of discourse and power, the study explores how the novel interrogates patriarchal constructions of female chastity, obedience, and honour. The paper analyzes Ahalya's transformation from a woman silenced by divine and social authority into a figure of intellectual and emotional emancipation. Rather than presenting the curse as merely a supernatural punishment, Kane interprets it as a metaphor for the systemic silencing of women within patriarchal institutions. Through Ahalya's introspection, questioning of established norms, and eventual assertion of selfhood, the novel exposes the gendered politics embedded in mythological narratives and challenges the binaries of purity and sin that have historically defined women's identities. The study further examines how Kane reimagines myth as a dynamic space of ideological resistance where marginalized female voices reclaim historical and cultural agency.

Key Words: Resistance, Emancipation, Mythological, Subjectivity, Supernatural.

Introduction:

Myths are not merely ancient narratives preserved through oral and literary traditions; they are dynamic cultural texts that shape social values, moral codes, and collective identities across generations. As repositories of ideological meanings, myths have historically functioned to legitimize systems of power, often reinforcing patriarchal norms and gender hierarchies through the representation of women as passive, obedient, or morally defined by male authority. Contemporary Indian literature has increasingly revisited these canonical narratives, transforming mythology into a site of critical inquiry where silenced voices are reclaimed and dominant interpretations are challenged. This trend of mythological retelling has enabled writers to reinterpret familiar epics from marginalized perspectives, foregrounding issues of gender, identity, agency, and resistance. Among the prominent voices in this movement, Kavita Kane has emerged as a significant feminist mythological writer whose novels reimagine women traditionally confined to the margins of epic literature. Through works such as *Karna's Wife*, *Sita's Sister*, and *Ahalya's Awakening*, Kane reconstructs mythological women as intellectually independent and emotionally complex individuals who question patriarchal authority and assert their autonomy. In *Ahalya's Awakening*, she revisits the story of Ahalya, who, in the *Valmiki Ramayana* and later retellings, is largely portrayed as a woman punished for alleged transgression and redeemed only through Rama's divine intervention. Kane departs from this conventional portrayal by granting Ahalya narrative agency, transforming her from an object of moral judgment into a self-aware protagonist who interrogates the structures of power governing her life. The present paper investigates how *Ahalya's Awakening* subverts the traditional myth by foregrounding the interconnected themes of voice, agency, and resistance. It argues that Kane's retelling challenges patriarchal constructions of femininity and reclaims Ahalya as a symbol of female selfhood and empowerment. Employing feminist literary criticism, myth revisionism, and theories of power and discourse, the study examines how the novel reconstructs myth as a space of ideological resistance rather than passive cultural inheritance. By focusing on the transformation of Ahalya from silence to self-expression and from victimhood to self-assertion, the paper contributes to the growing scholarship on contemporary feminist mythological fiction and demonstrates how the rewriting of myth serves as a powerful means of questioning entrenched social hierarchies and recovering marginalized female voices.

Literature Review:

Existing scholarship on contemporary mythological retellings provides a substantial theoretical foundation for understanding the reinterpretation of women in mythology, yet significant gaps remain. Studies on myth revisionism, particularly those of Alicia Ostriker, Marina Warner, and Adrienne Rich, establish that rewriting myths is a powerful literary strategy for challenging patriarchal narratives, recovering suppressed voices, and transforming inherited cultural traditions into sites of resistance. Feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Hélène Cixous further illuminate how gender is socially constructed and how women can reclaim subjectivity through self-expression, bodily autonomy, and *écriture féminine*, thereby offering valuable frameworks for analyzing female agency in mythological narratives. Within the Indian context, scholars examining the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Devdutt Pattanaik, and Kavita Kane have emphasized the growing trend of

revisiting epics and Puranic narratives to foreground marginalized characters and question conventional representations of gender, power, and identity. Specifically, research on Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* has largely concentrated on its feminist reinterpretation of Ahalya as a victim who transforms into a self-aware and empowered woman, highlighting themes of gender justice, identity, and social emancipation. However, most existing studies treat these themes independently and primarily interpret the novel through a broad feminist lens. There remains limited scholarly attention to how voice, agency, and resistance operate simultaneously as interconnected narrative strategies that collectively subvert mythic authority and reconstruct Ahalya's identity. By examining the dynamic relationship among these three concepts, the present study seeks to bridge this research gap and demonstrate how Kane's retelling not only reclaims a silenced female figure but also redefines myth as a space of feminist resistance, self-articulation, and cultural transformation.

Theoretical Framework:

The present study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates Feminist Literary Theory, Myth Revisionism, and theories of Power and Resistance to examine the reconstruction of Ahalya's identity in Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening*. Feminist thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and bell hooks provide the conceptual foundation for understanding how patriarchal societies construct femininity, regulate women's identities, and perpetuate gender-based oppression while also highlighting women's capacity for self-definition and resistance. Beauvoir's notion of woman as the "Other," Butler's theory of gender performativity, and hooks' emphasis on intersectional feminist resistance collectively explain the mechanisms through which Ahalya moves from objectification to self-assertion. The study further employs Alicia Ostriker's concept of myth revisionism, which views the rewriting of myths as a means of reclaiming marginalized voices and challenging patriarchal authority, alongside Roland Barthes' understanding of myth as an ideological system that naturalizes cultural power structures. These perspectives reveal how Kane dismantles traditional mythic assumptions and reconstructs Ahalya as an autonomous subject rather than a passive symbol. To analyze the dynamics of authority and opposition within the narrative, the study also draws on Michel Foucault's theory of power, which conceptualizes power as diffuse and productive rather than merely repressive, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", which foregrounds the historical silencing of marginalized voices and the challenges of reclaiming agency within dominant discourses. Together, these theoretical perspectives guide the analysis of the novel through the central concepts of myth as ideology, silence, voice, female agency, resistance, and patriarchal discourse, demonstrating how Kane's retelling transforms myth from a vehicle of patriarchal control into a space of feminist intervention, identity reconstruction, and cultural resistance.

Subverting Myth: Reimagining Ahalya

Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* radically subverts the traditional myth of Ahalya by transforming her from an obedient wife, a passive victim, and a cursed woman into an intelligent, questioning, emotionally complex, and politically aware individual who actively reconstructs her own identity. In the *Valmiki Ramayana*, Ahalya exists largely as an object of male desire and patriarchal judgment, with her redemption dependent upon Rama's grace. Kane rejects this one-dimensional portrayal by presenting Ahalya as a woman who interrogates social norms, challenges divine authority, and refuses to define herself through guilt or male validation. Rather than accepting the labels imposed upon her, Ahalya proclaims, "I searched all these years for myself and I only found Ahalya, the woman I was supposed to be born as: unblemished, without any faults. I had no hala in me, no sin, no crime, no guilt. What I had done was to respond to the call of life within me" (345). She further rejects patriarchal notions of salvation by declaring, "I don't need anyone's sanction or blessing. I had to seek my own salvation" (344). These assertions dismantle the traditional ideology that defines women through obedience, chastity, and male approval, replacing it with a discourse of self-realization and autonomy. Kane also rewrites female history by foregrounding Ahalya's intellectual curiosity, emotional resilience, and moral consciousness, thereby exposing the patriarchal mechanisms that silence women's experiences in myth. Through this revisionist narrative, Ahalya emerges not as a symbol of transgression but as a figure of resistance whose voice challenges divine and social authority alike. Consequently, *Ahalya's Awakening* demonstrates that myth is not a fixed cultural inheritance but a dynamic site where silenced women reclaim agency, redefine identity, and transform patriarchal narratives into stories of empowerment and feminist resistance.

Voice: From Silence to Self-Expression

Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* reconstructs Ahalya's voice by transforming her journey from patriarchal silence to conscious self-expression, thereby establishing narrative authority as an act of feminist resistance. Unlike the traditional *Ramayana*, where Ahalya remains largely voiceless and is defined through the judgments of male figures, Kane grants her a powerful narrative voice through interior monologues, reflective dialogues, and fearless questioning of sages, kings, and social conventions. Her gradual rejection of imposed silence culminates in the assertion, "I don't need anyone's sanction or blessing. I had to seek my own salvation" (344), followed by her declaration, "I searched all these years for myself and I only found Ahalya, the woman I was supposed to be born as: unblemished, without any faults. I had no hala in me, no sin, no crime, no guilt. What I had done was to respond to the call of life within me" (345). These statements symbolize her reclamation of speech from patriarchal discourse and demonstrate that identity is achieved not through external validation but through self-articulation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", becomes particularly relevant as Kane enables a historically silenced mythological woman to narrate her own experience rather than being represented by patriarchal authority. Similarly, Michel Foucault's conception of power as operating through discourse explains how Ahalya resists the ideological structures that regulate female identity by replacing silence with counter-discourse, while Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine* illuminates Kane's strategy of allowing Ahalya's emotions, memories, and embodied experiences to become sources of knowledge and liberation. Through this convergence of voice, resistance, and self-expression, *Ahalya's Awakening* redefines myth as a space where the silenced woman becomes the author of her own history, challenging patriarchal authority and reclaiming the narrative once denied to her.

Agency: Reclaiming Identity and Selfhood

Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* redefines Ahalya as an autonomous woman who transforms from a passive object of patriarchal control into an active subject with agency and selfhood. Through her intellect, emotional independence, and ability to

make her own decisions, Ahalya challenges the authority of Gautama, questions the injustice surrounding Indra's actions, and reclaims her dignity beyond the roles imposed upon her as wife and mother. Rejecting the silence and guilt enforced by patriarchy, she asserts, "I don't need anyone's sanction or blessing. I had to seek my own salvation" (344), and later declares, "I had no hala in me, no sin, no crime, no guilt" (345). These statements symbolize her journey from dependence to self-realization, illustrating that identity is achieved through self-respect and inner conviction rather than male validation. Kane's retelling thus presents Ahalya as a symbol of female agency, resistance, and self-definition.

Resistance: Challenging Patriarchal Power

Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* presents resistance as a powerful challenge to patriarchy, religious orthodoxy, gender stereotypes, victim blaming, and moral policing by exposing how women's bodies become sites of social control. The curse imposed on Ahalya functions as a metaphor for the silencing and punishment of women who transgress patriarchal expectations, while ideals of honour and purity are shown to be cultural constructs rather than moral absolutes. Rejecting these oppressive norms, Ahalya refuses to internalize guilt and declares, "I don't need anyone's sanction or blessing. I had to seek my own salvation" (344). She further asserts her freedom by proclaiming, "I had no hala in me, no sin, no crime, no guilt" (345). These declarations challenge the patriarchal discourse that defines women through chastity and obedience. Read through Michel Foucault's concept of power, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and bell hooks' feminist critique of domination, Ahalya's resistance becomes an act of reclaiming bodily autonomy, dignity, and identity. Kane's retelling ultimately transforms the myth into a narrative of liberation, where resistance lies in rejecting imposed shame and asserting the right to define.

Conclusion:

Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* successfully transforms a traditional myth into a powerful feminist discourse by reimagining Ahalya as an active historical subject rather than a passive figure defined by patriarchal judgment. Through the interconnected themes of voice, agency, and resistance, the novel dismantles the conventional portrayal of Ahalya as a symbol of sin and instead presents her as a woman who questions authority, reclaims her identity, and defines her own destiny. Her assertion, "I don't need anyone's sanction or blessing. I had to seek my own salvation" (344), symbolizes the rejection of patriarchal validation, while her declaration, "I had no hala in me, no sin, no crime, no guilt" (345), redefines her identity beyond the narratives of shame and punishment imposed upon her. Thus, voice becomes an act of resistance, agency becomes a path to liberation, and myth becomes a dynamic space for questioning patriarchal authority and reconstructing marginalized histories. By reclaiming a silenced female voice and challenging dominant ideological structures, *Ahalya's Awakening* makes a significant contribution to contemporary Indian mythological fiction, demonstrating that the rewriting of myth is not merely a literary exercise but a powerful act of cultural, historical, and ideological resistance.

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