

AHALYA, SEEN THROUGH THE FEMALE GAZE- A STUDY OF KORAL DASGUPTA'S, AHALYA, IN RELATION TO THE MYTH OF AHALYA AS MENTIONED IN VALMIKI'S RAMAYANA.

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to compare the protagonist of Koral Dasgupta's novel Ahalya with the character of Ahalya as it appears in the epic Ramayana. It examines the literature from the female gaze. It will examine how women are portrayed as the "other" in canonical literature. It highlights the fact about how the male writers portray female characters as marginalised, and how these marginalised characters have an identity of their own. The primary emphasis on the evident influence of patriarchy is in Valmiki's description of Ahalya's sexual relationship with Indra, which exposes infidelity in her relationship with Maharishi Gautam. Koral Dasgupta on the other hand portrays her character as an innocent, loyal woman tricked by the gods. Additionally, since there isn't much written about Ahalya as a person in the epic, the study shows the character development of Ahalya in Koral Dasgupta's novel.

Keywords: Ahalya, Ramayana, Koral Dasgupta, Valmiki, Rama, Maharshi Gautam, Indra, Hindu religion, patriarchy, and Gender.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hindu religious texts, scriptures, epics, folktales, and stories of Gods and Demons, have always fascinated writers from across the globe. These texts, whether written or oral, have been passed on through generations since the millennia. These texts have set up certain unwritten rules about the ways of life. People use them as references or look up to the religious characters as their role models in life. Knowingly or unknowingly deeds of humans are often compared to the benchmarks set by these texts, citing examples set by the deeds of the Gods, as written in the Vedas, Puranas, Upnishads, or holy books. One such story is that of Maharishi Gautam and his wife Ahalya. It is a tale of desires, infidelity, curses, and liberation.

Sage Valmiki, also known as Adikavi or first poet, was born to sage Prachetasa near the river Ganga. During his early years, he got lost in the forest, where he was raised by a hunter and he ended up being a Bandit. He comes under the influence of Narad Muni and Lord Brahma, who instruct him to write the story of Lord Rama, the Scion of Ikshvaku Clan, to guide the generations through his life that he lived to lead through examples. The tale of Ahalya appears in the Ramayana written by Sage Valmiki in the Canto XLVIII, titled 'Indra and Ahalya' and Canto XLIX, titled 'Ahalya Freed'. Ramayana is the life story of Prince of Ayodhya, Rama, the Scion of Ikshvaku, who was the son of King Dashrath and his first wife Kaushalya. It begins with Narad Muni visiting Sage Valmiki and narrating to him the tale of Prince Ram.

Valmiki writes the entire story and then it is narrated by Luv and Kush, the sons of King Ram. The epic narrated the greatness of Ram as an individual and as a ruler, who leads through example. Many writers around the world have been inspired by the epic and have transcribed it into various literary forms such as short stories, movies, plays, ramleela, series, etc. One such writer is Koral Dasgupta. She has under her name many non-fictional texts detailing human relationships, and the complex minds that lead to unexpected ends. The text, titled *Ahalya*, is a part of the Sati series. The series focuses on the mythological stories of the Panchakanya or the five virtuous women, Ahalya, Kunti, Draupadi, Tara and Mandodari. *Ahalya* presents a

fresh take on the over explored story of Ahalya, as it has seldom been narrated from the point of view of the female protagonist.

The Female Gaze:

Coined by Laura Mulvey, in the year 1975, in her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', the term *Female Gaze*, provides an alternative view point to art and literature produced. The term was originally coined in opposition to the Male Gaze (the portrayal of female characters as just objects of desire by men in cinema), to showcase the ways in which women and other genders can be looked at or perceived as. In this essay the concept of female gaze is applied to the character of Ahalya in the *Ramayana* written by the great sage Valmiki and in *Ahalya* written by a contemporary female author Koral Dasgupta. It will delve into the lack of narrative description of the character of Ahalya in the *Ramayana*, as opposed to the deeper understanding and explanation of the physical, emotional and psychological traits of the protagonist in the novel *Ahalya*. The essay will look into the character of Ahalya through the female gaze to analyse the way a man and a woman portray the character of a lady.

2. AHALYA IN VALMIKI'S RAMAYANA:

The story of Ahalya and Maharishi Gautam is a small part of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. It is narrated by Guru Vishwamitra when he, along with Princes, Rama and Lakshmana, is on his way to the city of Mithila. When the princes reach the destroyed hermitage of Maharishi Gautam, they ask Vishwamitra about it and he narrates to them the story of Ahalya and her husband Maharishi Gautam. Canto XLVIII, titled 'Indra and Ahalya' explains in brief the interaction between the God of gods, Indra, and Ahalya, the wife of the hermit. Vishwamitra praises the hermit for his ascetic duties and rites that he performed to gain the status of a Maharishi. He then explains how Indra saw Maharishi leaving the hermitage and took a chance to seduce Ahalya in the disguise of her husband. Ahalya saw through the disguise, but gave in to the pleasures of love-making. When she realised that her husband would return soon, she asked Indra to leave. While leaving the hermitage, Gautam saw Indra, and he realised that Indra had visited the hermitage and indulged in a sexual act with his wife. In rage the Maharishi curses Indra that he will never be able to enjoy sexual pleasure in his life and his body will be exposed to the world.

Then Maharishi moves on to curse his wife saying,
"For countless years, disloyal spouse,
Devoted to severest vows,
Thy bed the ashes, air thy food,
Here shalt thou live in solitude.
This lonely grove thy home shall be,
And not an eye thy form shall see.
When Rāma, Das'aratha's child,
Shall seek these shades then drear and wild,
His coming shall remove thy stain,
And make the sinner pure again.
Due honour paid to him, thy guest,
Shall cleanse thy fond and erring breast,
Thee to my side in bliss restore,
And give thy proper shape once more."¹

After cursing Ahalya, the Maharishi leaves for the Himalayas to perform religious and spiritual rites. Canto XLIX, titled 'Ahalya Freed' gives insight into the way Lord Rama touches the feet of Ahalya and frees her from the curse, wiping away all her sins, leading her to becoming a pure woman and faithful wife, who will be praised for her devotion towards her husband. The parts in which Sage Valmiki mentions about the story of Maharishi Gautam and Ahalya, he fails to look at the story from Ahalya's point of view. It just gives the readers one sided view, that of Valmiki as a writer. Nothing more is written about why Indra chose Ahalya over the nymphs of heaven? Was Ahalya actually guilty, and did she deserve the punishment that she received from her husband?

3. AHALYA IS KORAL DAGUPTA'S AHALYA:

Ahalya is one of the *Panchkanyas* of the Hindu mythology who are considered to be Kanyas, or women who retain their virginity or purity in spite of being married. The story of Ahalya is mentioned in the *Balkanda* of the epic *Ramayana*. The protagonist of Koral Dasgupta's novel *Ahalya*, comes across as a naïve young soul, who witnesses her birthing process, where Lord Brahma creates her from the various elements of nature, in order

to create his finest creation he focuses his entire energy in making the body of this creation to be flawless. The soul of Ahalya tries to understand her father's intention and figure how she is superior from all the other creations of Brahma. Lord Brahma tells her that she is his brainchild, and not a creature born out of the consummation of a man and a woman. She is confused and she finds solace in the wind who agrees to become her mother to guide and protect her forever. After the creation is complete the soul of Ahalya enters her body and she is given under the care of Maharishi Gautam, who teaches her unconventionally and raises her until she reaches womanhood. Maharishi Gautam takes her back to Brahma. Lord Brahma gives Ahalya away to Gautam as his wife, thinking that no one can be a better husband for his beautiful daughter other than the old saint, who remains unaffected by the presence of Ahalya. Ahalya protests her marriage, but Brahma plays the parent card and says he knows what is best for her. Despite her disagreement she is married to Gautam, and she toils day in and day out to get a position in his life and find love for herself in his heart. Gradually she succeeds, but Indra, who has always been enchanted by her beauty, lusts after her and disguises as Gautam himself. Assuming that she is making love to her husband, she gives in to passionate love-making with Indra. When Gautam realises that his wife has cheated on him, he curses Indra and Ahalya. He does not give her a chance to explain her side, neither does he think of her as a person. For him, her chastity (that she loses because of Indra's trickery) is more important than the sacrifices she has made in their marriage. Her turmoil as a girl, as a student of Gautam, as a daughter of Brahma, as a wife of Gautam, and as a woman is beautifully depicted in the novel, where her character develops from the time she is a soul till the time she is cursed to become a stone.

4. AHALYA SEEN THROUGH FEMALE GAZE.

When as readers we look at both the texts discussed above through the female gaze, we realise that the story that appears in the *Ramayana* focuses on the gaze of the male characters of the epic, showing a patriarchal mindset of the writer. On the other hand, when we read the character of Ahalya in the novel *Ahalya*, we find a face to the character and see her through her viewpoint, the female gaze. The character of Ahalya is hardly touched upon by Sage Valmiki in the epic *Ramayana*. It appears as though through the story of Ahalya he wanted to give his readers a reason to make the protagonist prince Ram, a character larger than life, a character who possesses qualities like no other. Through the narration of Sage Vishwamitra we see that he shows Maharishi Gautam, as a revered saint, someone who has pleased Lord Brahma with his ascetic works and devotion towards religious rites and duties. But the same epic fails to give justice to the character who is the centre of her story, the one who is a *Panchkanya*, praised for her devotion for her father and her husband. The character of Ahalya is extremely well developed in the novel written by Koral Dasgupta, as she shows us the other side of the coin. She is a character who is wronged by the most important men in her life, her father and her guide/ husband. Brahma being the creator fails to understand the desires and feelings of Ahalya as his daughter. He treats her like a prized possession, a commodity that he can pass on to a saint. Maharishi Gautam, initially remains indifferent towards Ahalya, but she constantly takes efforts to make herself a part of his life, and wishes to play the part of his better-half. The two end up building a connection, but after Indra seduces Ahalya, Gautam blames her for his state, and curses her without realising that she is not at fault and does not deserve the treatment that she receives at the hands of her husband. There are various versions of the story of Ahalya, but the ultimate end of each of these stories is that Gautam did not care to listen to his own wife. All these stories show us that the men gaze through women only through desire, and fail to respect the gaze of the females in their lives.

Footnote: The monologue of Maharishi Gautam in Canto XLVIII of the translated version of the *Ramayana* mentioned in the references. It describes the rage and wrath of Gautam that falls upon his disloyal wife.

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