
AHALYA'S AWAKENING: A JOURNEY OF BREAKING FROM CONDITIONING TO SELF-ACTUALISATION

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Abstract

Ahalya's Awakening by Kavita Kane attempts to investigate the role of mythology in guiding an individual to self-discovery and empowerment while breaking away from social conditioning. Kavita Kane's reimagined mythological tale of Ahalya, a misunderstood and marginalised cursed woman, finds her liberation by re-discovering herself in solitude. This paper utilizes Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) to understand Ahalya's journey from struggle to awakening. The paper reflects upon the fundamentals of human motivation, especially the drivers to self-actualization. Through the story of Ahalya, the paper tries to unfold layers of sociocultural conditioning and false consciousness creating hindrances in realizing one's true potential and self; which is often lost in the quest of fitting into the already set discourse. This paper highlights the importance of mythological accounts in making sense of the complexities of the human psyche, even in contemporary times.

Keywords: discourse, false consciousness, gender roles, mythology, self-actualisation.

Introduction

India's most celebrated epics *the Mahabharata* and *the Ramayana* play a significant role, not as just a rich ancient Indian culture, but may be present not in physical form but are engraved in India's collective unconscious. These epics are "A deposit of moral values, cultural identity and socio-political structure and a source of moral lessons forever on dharma, karma and the perpetual battle between vicissitude and virtue" (Rohit, 2016). Modern rewriting of these stories addresses the serious questions adjacent to rigid, orthodox institutions. But their core idea and thoughts behind every story remain very influential and resonant with everyone's ever-changing social life. Jung and his followers recognize myths as valuable for their explanatory, restorative, transformational, compensatory, therapeutic, spiritual and personal potential. He saw the "vital importance of myths" in their ability to explain "to the bewildered human being what was going on in his unconscious and why he was held fast." (Mehrtens, 2023) Thus he explains the great impact of Myths and mythologies on the unconscious mind. Jung was often asked where myths and archetypes come from. He felt that "myths never were and never are made consciously, they arise from man's unconscious." (Mehrtens, 2023) It seemed to him "that their origin can only be explained by

assuming them to be deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity" (Jung, 1998).

In the myth Ahalya, who is the creation of Brahma, marriage with Rishi Gautama and faces a tragic encounter with Indra which brings her to redemption, the motif of self-discovery. Following the trail from *The Ramayana*, Ahalya's journey explores the themes of agency and autonomy. By examining how mythology resonates with the pathways on the way to personal growth and self-actualization, the research uses Abraham Harold Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs explains human motivation, a theory of psychological health predicated on fulfilling instinctive human drives in priority, culminating in the topmost level of need, which is self-actualization, realizing the full potential of self leads one to the path of personal growth (Maslow, 1943). Analyzing the journey of Ahalya's life gives us a new perspective on autonomy and social limitations in shaping an individual's destiny, the purpose of the paper is to illuminate on breaking from false consciousness and ideologies about gender limitations and set discourse of society and promotion of personal growth.

Thematic Analysis

A dictionary defines "myth" as "an invented story." The common belief is that is not true. But Devdutt Patnaik, a mythologist views mythology as 'my truth'. Jung had a very different attitude: He saw myths as "original revelations of the pre-

conscious psyche,”(Jung, 1960) the most mature product of humanity and “not a conscious invention at all.” As a natural product of the human psyche, Jung felt that myths are manifestations of unconscious impulses, miracle tales, that express “a universal disposition in man” (Mehrtens, 2023). Thus myths, beyond conscious awareness, stories and symbols affect the fundamentals of the human psyche, which shapes human values, beliefs and behaviors (Jung,1998). Joseph Campbell, a mythologist talks about the power of mythology in building the narrative through the realities of human experience across the cultures at societal levels. “Every myth is psychologically symbolic. Its narratives and images are to be read, therefore, not literally, but as metaphors.” (Campbell, 1993). He asserted that myths offer a greater Truth than anything in the realm of mere logic, “Myth is much more important and truer than history. History is just journalism and you know how reliable that is” (Mayers, 2018). Also, Sigmund Freud in his work on the interpretation of dreams and the unconscious mind highlights the relationship of storytelling and self-understanding. Summarizing the works of these scholars indicates a stronghold of mythology on driving individuals’ self-sight and their existence.

In his paper, The Theory of Motivation Maslow introduced his hierarchy of needs. Which talks about achieving basic human instincts, in a particular order. He gave a five-tier model of human needs. The first four stages are known as

deficiency needs in which one’s deficiency drives its motivation. The more time spent on the stage, the stronger the motivation to fulfil those needs becomes. Growth needs do not stem from a lack of something, but rather from a desire to grow as a person. Once these growth needs have been reasonably satisfied, one may be able to reach the highest level called self-actualization. (MacLeod, 2018) A desire “to become everything one is capable of becoming” (Maslow, 1987, p. 64).

The first key concept of Marxist criticism is ‘ideology’. It is a twist of real economic and social conditions. Social institutions such as culture, religion, and education made the oppressed believe that this order of inequality is natural. The ideology is, to neutralize an exploitative relationship and convince them that this is how things are. This is termed false consciousness, by Kal Marx. These discourses, which are sets of information, values, rules, and knowledge generated by these institutions condition humans' lives. (Nayar) In the case of Ahalya, she questions these knowledge and ideologies and demands equality in education, status and gender roles. She wanted to learn archery so that in critical situations of war, she could defend herself and go to the ashram for higher education. But her mother expected her to marry as she had attained a certain age. Vashisht knew about Ahalya’s intelligence but also worried about whether her parents would be able to handle such an extraordinariness. All others see her for the beauty she has, not for her intellect. Her father was surprised when he found

Ahalya had a good knowledge of politics too besides philosophy. All these incidents have indicators of social conditioning and gender roles that is, unquestionable acceptance of what is the definition and role of an ideal girl, an ideal daughter and an ideal princess. Girls are expected to adhere to specific rules and regulations as they grow up, conforming to societal expectations of behavior as gender roles. Daughters feel obligated to fulfil certain roles within their families. Furthermore, there's an expectation that, at a certain age, a princess must marry a prince.

Kane has directly attacked the patriarchal framework, challenging the generalized term of *swayamvara* historically- the word itself is contradictory. As there is a condition, a quest to be fulfilled to win a bride. This is the best example of false consciousness, where calling marriage a *swayamvar*, the bride is not free to choose a groom for herself, groom wins her as a price for the conquest. "Ahalya sank into a chair. 'So, I don't get to choose after all—it's hardly a *swayamwar*', she whispered bitterly. 'I will have to be won. I am the prize trophy to be gifted to the winner of this senseless contest!'" (Kane, 113). After the marriage of Ahalya to Rishi Gautam, the same protagonist, who was very strong and resilient, takes a stand for herself, and falls prey to hegemony. She was not aware of the fact that she had completely moulded herself into the social framework of an ideal good wife. She did not realise that gradually she was going away from herself. And now she has become a caretaker of

the ashram, a helper of Gautam, makes all three meals for all, she takes care of all the children of the Ashram as her own. She has no time left for her education, for herself. She tries to catch up with the backlog of her studies at nighttime, but how could she, as she has been so tired of all the work she does throughout her day.

On the other hand, Gautam who has promised to be her guru and will help her achieve her desire to become a Rishika, now taking back steps as he got busy with his scholarly works. She has tried to get Gautam's attention, on matters of her studies and also on herself too. But differences increase as time passes. Gautam seems to postpone almost every conversation and argument. Now he is treating Ahalya as one of his recalcitrant Children in the Ashram. Ahalya is bearing his anger issues. She had tried a lot to resolve this issue, but now she is so quiet as she has accepted that it is the way of her life, as she has been conditioned that a wife must take care of the house, her children and also her husband without any questions, these gender roles are pre-assumed and enforced on almost every woman. Then there is Indra, who is madly wants Ahalya. Even after all those years, he couldn't accept the fact that now Ahalya was someone's wife and mother of three children, he had no right to desire her. But still, he is so fond of her. He has visited the Ashram when Gautam was not there. Spying for days and noted the schedule of Ahalya. Managed to have a word her, asked for her forgiveness, as how he behaved at her *swayamvar* and offended her in front of

everyone, and convinced her how sorry he was all these years and he was heart to see her in this miserable condition, that she is not happy in a marriage. Now the next day in the early morning, after Gautam left for a bath. Taking advantage of his absence Indra has taken the form of Gautam and seduced Ahalya, as she soon found out that this is not his Gautam, then soon, she recognized him as Indra. But still, she has given herself to him. When Gautam arrived and cursed Indra, to have vulvas all over his body. To let the whole world see what Indra had done. She hoped Indra would save him from Gautam, but soon she realised what a big mistake she had made. Trusting Indra had a love for her, it was just lust. He ran away and was so embarrassed, that he even did not think of Ahalya for once and flew. Gautam realized all the mistakes he had made in these past years and that he couldn't keep his promises to keep her happy.

Gautam continued tonelessly, 'Man believes he is free to do what he wants. He can explore lands and knowledge and passion all so easily. Not so a woman. She is not allowed to be free. Rishi Veda allowed it. Rishi Agastya realized it. I did neither. Like other men, I treated you not as a wife but as most men treat most women: I thwarted you, made you inert and compliant, restricted you to home keeping and legal subordination. Me,' he said contemptuously. 'Me, who made laws for women so they could uphold their rights... I couldn't cherish my wife!' (324)

He assured her that that was not only her fault, but he failed as the husband he had promised her. He left for his redemption and left her alone away from this cruel world's sight to seek herself, to seek self-realization. It is not a curse that the world believes, but that was assured by the fact that Gautam has gone and left her for her mistake.

'It's not a new partner you were seeking but your new self', interposed Gautam, his eyes sad but a glimpse of pride in the twin pools of despair. 'You are your own equal, you don't need anyone but your perpetual thirst for "otherness", Ahalya,' he said gently. 'Go find it, seek it.' (327-328)

'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,' he said softly. 'In that quest you shall receive your salvation—the deliverance you searched for so long all these years.' (328)

Those were his last words, she lost all sense of her surroundings, she seemed frozen, like a sculpture. She has been recollecting all the memories, of love, pain, guilt, and humiliation hoping when would she be free from all this, as Gautam promised her. Seeking enlightenment, but she was

so disappointed with herself, as her children were too. That her one lapse of judgement led her to this path, for once, only once she had chosen herself and was now living with the consequences. In this time of her meditation, she questions the society what warmth did they get by seeing a women subjugated and subjected to a trial of chastity and fidelity? ‘She had found herself caught in this realm of distinct moral codes and conduct’ (332). She is recollecting her childhood memories that how she was of so strong opinion about her education. What is she searching for now, all she loved was lost. But this is the path of self-actualization, one has to untangle oneself from all worldly threads to seek what is inside. Still unconscious of her surroundings, senseless as a rock. “She realized that she had been exploited by these two men, Gautam in his righteous neglect and Indra in his obsessive lust” (334). The curse of Indra has replaced thousands of vulvas with eyes, he has gotten away from the curse, and he is still king of the gods. And she is still stuck stagnating in time. How he got a second chance and not her.

She refused to wake up again in this heartless world, that could not hear her cry for justice. Finally, she has found herself. Achieved self-actualization, Ahalya did not stir once freed herself from all ties (335). She did not stir once. She was not alone. She was with herself now. Her lifelessness had faded away she had a sense of drowsy peace. Her guilt has left her heart and now feeling so light and full field with calmness inside.

Conclusion

The contemporary ‘Ahalya’ portrays the essence of understanding the human psyche, behaviors and experiences; to seek their true selves within. Humans tend to find happiness and containment by materialistic approaches, but to be truly happy one does not need validation, or support from others. Happiness in the truest sense cannot be oriented to someone else. Mythology can serve as a guiding tool in making an individual realize their potential, embracing themselves, while continuing the journey towards self-actualization. Indians, are gifted with a repository of timeless wisdom such as *Vedas*, *shastras*, mythology, ancient epics, etc. which has been passed on from one generation to another. This paper has attempted to make sense of the popular mythic character Ahalya through the lens of Maslow’s theory on the hierarchy of needs. The analysis revealed the journey of her evolution in a woman who realizes her potential and thus works towards fulfilling it. She had freed herself from her inner and societal shackles, beliefs that are a result of constant socialization and conditioning. She realized her false consciousness and broke free from the shell of interpellation. While finding peace in herself, she took a step towards spiritual awakening.

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