

Reclaiming the Silenced: Feminist Mythmaking in Koral Dasgupta's *Ahalya*

¹**Simran Kashyap**, Research Scholar, Department of Humanities & Management, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar National Institute of Technology, Jalandhar (Punjab), India.
simrank.hm.23@nitj.ac.in ORCID ID- <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7956-2119>.

²**Dr. Aditya Prakash**, Associate Professor, Department of Humanities & Management, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar National Institute of Technology, Jalandhar (Punjab), India.
prakasha@nitj.ac.in ORCID ID-<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0254-4725>.

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Abstract

This paper examines Koral Dasgupta's reinterpretation of Ahalya (2020), which reclaims the character's silenced agency, particularly in relation to desire, deception, and redemption. Traditionally depicted as the wife of the sage Gautama, Ahalya becomes the subject of a complex narrative when Indra, disguised as her husband, approaches her. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theorisation of power and the regulation of sexuality, the study reads the traditional narrative as a discursive mechanism that disciplines female desire and reinforces moral authority. It further engages with Alicia Ostriker's concept of revisionist mythmaking, which questions hegemonic representations that silence women's lived experiences. Through these frameworks, the paper argues that contemporary retellings transform Ahalya from a passive figure defined by curse and redemption into a subject capable of articulating her own narrative and sexual autonomy.

Keywords: Ahalya; Feminist Myth Retellings; Koral Dasgupta; Reclaiming; Sexual Agency

Introduction

Valmiki's *Ahalya* has been written and explored in various adaptations, revealing its multidimensional critique of the story, which is mostly read as a tale of a woman cursed by her husband to turn into stone for her adulterous affair with Indra. The story serves as a moral exemplar for future generations of women. The figure of Ahalya has always been marked by a certain interpretive unease within the *Ramayana* tradition. Although her presence in the epic is brief, her story continues to provoke sustained reflection on female desire, culpability, and redemption. In most classical tellings, Ahalya is framed within a rigid moral structure that oscillates between sin and absolution, where her body becomes the site upon which patriarchal anxieties surrounding sexuality are inscribed. However, as A. K. Ramanujan argues, *The Ramayana* does not exist as a singular, unified text but as a constellation of "many Ramayanas," shaped by diverse cultural and ideological contexts. This plurality opens up interpretive possibilities, allowing figures like Ahalya to be revisited not as fixed moral symbols but as evolving narrative constructs.

Indian mythology offers a rich body of texts on female identities, with the potential to yield multiple reinterpretations. However, some reinterpretations rarely enter everyday discourse and often provoke discomfort or uneasy silence. While traditional Indian narratives predominantly

construct women as the embodiment of purity and chastity, certain retellings foreground more complex and transgressive representations. Female figures in mythology, such as the *Panchkanyas* (*Ahalya*, *Draupadi*, *Kunti*, *Tara*, and *Mandodari*) exemplify this tension, as their narratives simultaneously invoke ideals of sanctity while engaging with themes that question normative moral frameworks. The figure of Ahalya in the *Ramayana* has historically been framed through narratives of sexual transgression, punishment, and redemption, where the woman's voice remains largely absent. Traditional interpretations construct Ahalya as a moral exemplar of female fallibility, situating her body within patriarchal codes of purity and chastity. Contemporary mythological retellings in Indian writing in English challenge this inherited framework by revisiting the politics of sexual control embedded within the myth. Her story, most prominently found in the *Ramayana*, is brief yet charged with interpretive tension. Positioned at the intersection of desire, deception, and punishment, Ahalya becomes a figure whose identity is defined by moral transgression and redemption. The narrative, as it is read, offers little access to her interiority; instead, it constructs her as an ideal of moral judgment, defined by the consequences of a single episode. Yet, her inclusion within the *Panchkanya* tradition complicates this ideology, suggesting that she works as a symbol that exceeds the moral boundaries within which she is often contained.

This paper begins by grounding Ahalya's narrative in the binaries of guilt and innocence, purity and impurity, and sin and redemption that have always structured its interpretation. By shifting the lens from what Ahalya represents to how she has been represented, the study seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which her narrative has been shaped and sustained through generations. In doing so, it asks: How does the figure of Ahalya come to embody the regulation of female desire? What role does the curse play as a mechanism of discipline within the narrative? And how do contemporary reinterpretations challenge or reconfigure these inherited meanings? The central argument of this paper is that Ahalya's narrative reveals a tension between the ideal of chastity and resistance to the construction of female sexuality. While traditional texts study it as a curse, silence, and moral judgment to contain and regulate female desire, contemporary retellings disturb these structures by reclaiming voice, agency, and patriarchal authority. This study draws on the theoretical frameworks of Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva, alongside feminist revisionist approaches articulated by Alicia Ostriker, to examine how Ahalya's narrative constructs and regulates female sexuality through discursive and symbolic means. In this movement from silence to speech, Ahalya emerges not as a fixed symbol of wrongdoing but as a dynamic human whose story continues to be rewritten in response to changing cultural and theoretical contexts. Ahalya's narrative, therefore, does not simply illustrate the regulation of female sexuality but exposes its constructedness, exploring the possibility of rereading myth as a space where discipline is resisted and subjectivity is reclaimed.

Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

In recent years, feminist scholarship has re-examined Ahalya through the lens of revisionist mythmaking, foregrounding her voice and subjectivity in ways that earlier readings have often neglected. Contemporary retellings such as Dasgupta's *Ahalya* (2020) and Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) seek to move beyond the trope of the "fallen woman" and instead present Ahalya as a thinking, desiring subject negotiating the constraints imposed upon her. Recent critical studies on mythological retellings have similarly emphasised how the image of the petrified woman is reconfigured into one of awakening and resistance, thereby challenging the moral rigidity of earlier narratives. These approaches draw upon Alicia Ostriker's concept of revisionist mythmaking, which understands the rewriting of myth as a political and literary

act that disrupts patriarchal narrative structures (72). At the same time, they resonate with Beauvoir's argument that women are historically constructed as the "Other," her identity mediated through male-authored discourse (16). Yet the emphasis on recovering voice and agency raises broader questions about the cultural and discursive processes by which figures such as Ahalya are marked as transgressive.

While these feminist reinterpretations are crucial in recovering Ahalya's agency, they often stop short of interrogating the deeper structures that produce her as "transgressive" in the first place. Foucault's work becomes central to the present study. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that sexuality is not a natural or merely repressed phenomenon but is actively produced through discourse, classification, and regimes of knowledge (92). This insight is particularly useful in understanding how Ahalya's desire is constructed as "transgression" within a moralising narrative framework. Further, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault conceptualises punishment as a visible demonstration of power, a "spectacle" that disciplines not only the individual body but also the social imagination (3). Read through this lens, Ahalya's petrification can be understood not simply as divine retribution but as a symbolic act that publicly inscribes the consequences of female desire, thereby reinforcing patriarchal norms. Complementing this, Kristeva's theory of abjection provides a framework for understanding how Ahalya's body is marked as impure and excluded in order to preserve social order (2). The abject, as Kristeva suggests, is that which disturbs boundaries and must therefore be cast out; Ahalya's transformation into stone can thus be read as a form of symbolic expulsion, followed by controlled reintegration through purification. Together, Foucauldian and Kristevan frameworks enable a more layered understanding of how sexuality, punishment, and exclusion operate within the narrative.

Ahalya, the Politics of Curse, and the Regulation of Female Sexuality

The character of Ahalya is one of the most complex and contested in Hindu mythology, offering a site for studying the intersections of sexuality, power, guilt, and narrative control. As one of the five *Panchkanyas*, Ahalya's story is marked not only by its thematic ambiguity but also by its enduring cultural functions as a cautionary tale. Central to her narrative is the episode involving Indra's deception, followed by Gautama's curse that turned her into a stone for ages, until her eventual atonement by Ram. This angle that encodes the politics of female sexuality and its regulation within the patriarchal structure. From Valmiki's *Ramayana* to Kamban's *Kamba Ramayana* and, more recently, Dasgupta's *Ahalya*, retellings of Ahalya's story reflect evolving cultural anxieties and interpretations of female desire, agency, and moral accountability. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Ahalya's encounter with Indra unfolds within a narrative marked by ambiguity. Indra assumes the form of Gautama and approaches Ahalya, Brahma's most beautiful creation. Ahalya's transgressive episode is characterised by interpretive ambiguity, as several retellings refrain from explicitly articulating the nature or intention of her act, leaving open the question of whether she was deceived or complicit and, in some texts, such as Kamban's *Ramayana*, whether her act was a conscious choice to violate dharmic codes. This indeterminacy is significant, for it reveals an early narrative discomfort with explicitly articulating female desire. Yet, despite the ambiguity, the consequences are unambiguous: Gautama's curse renders Ahalya invisible, removed from the social world and condemned to a prolonged state of isolation (Valmiki 1.47). Thus, the curse operates not merely as retribution but as a form of symbolic annihilation, erasing Ahalya's presence and voice. As Paula Richman observes, regional retellings of the *Ramayana* often reshape characters to align with evolving social norms, particularly regarding gender and sexuality (23). Ahalya, in this context, becomes a didactic figure through whom the dangers of female sexual autonomy are portrayed.

The curse functions as a disciplinary apparatus in the Foucauldian sense, a technique of power

that produces docile bodies through surveillance, punishment, and normalisation. Ahalya's transformation to stone can be read as her reduction to invisibility, which symbolises the ultimate containment of female sexuality and desire: a body rendered inert, a voice silenced, a subjectivity suspended. In Dasgupta's novel, Gautama curses Ahalya, stating that, "You stripped me of my consciousness; you would be left here alone, ripped apart from your senses. Like a stone you will lie on the hard earth, inert and dormant" (171-172). This punishment is not proportionate to the act; rather, it reflects what Foucault identified as the "spectacle of punishment", wherein the body becomes a site for the inscription of power (*Discipline* 34).

Crucially, the narrative constructs Ahalya's identity through what may be termed the construction of guilt. In various versions where she is deceived, the burden of moral responsibility is disproportionately assigned to her. This difference reflects a broader patriarchal logic in which women are positioned as guardians of sexual morality, while male transgressions are normalised. Adrienne Rich's concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" is instructive here, as it underscores how women are conditioned to accept norms that regulate their bodies and desires. Therefore, Ahalya's guilt is not merely narrative but ideological, functioning to reinforce a culture in which female sexuality must remain controlled and preserved.

The question of sexual transgression in Ahalya's story cannot be separated from the politics of the representation of her desire. Her desire, whether real or imagined, is framed as a threat to social order, underscoring the necessity of a moral recovery intervention. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further illuminates this dynamic act, suggesting that norms of femininity are maintained through repeated acts of regulation (33). In this cultural setup, Ahalya's punishment serves to reiterate these norms, demonstrating the consequences of deviation and thereby reinforcing the ideal of chastity.

Kristeva's theory of abjection offers a productive way of rethinking Ahalya's petrification beyond its conventional interpretation as divine punishment. Kristeva argues that societies maintain their symbolic order by excluding that which threatens established boundaries, defining the abject as that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (4). Ahalya occupies precisely such a position within the narrative. Her sexuality, whether understood as consensual desire, deception, or transgression, disrupts the patriarchal ideal of the chaste wife upon which the moral order of the text depends. The curse, therefore, functions not simply as a punitive act but as a mechanism of exclusion through which this disruption is contained. Gautama's anger is displayed in his curse when he says, "May you forget all about the form you are so boastful of. Surviving thus you would merit yourself no more importance than an ordinary rock" (172). Significantly, Ahalya is not entirely erased; instead, she is transformed into stone, a state that places her between categories of life and non-life, presence and absence, subject and object. This liminal existence reflects what Kristeva identifies as the condition of the abject, which remains "radically excluded" while continuing to trouble the boundaries of the symbolic order (2).

Ahalya's dual status as a sinner and a purifier suggests the presence of a different moral study, one that acknowledges the complexity of female experience beyond rigid binaries of purity and impurity. The dichotomy may be read as a residue of matriarchal or non-patriarchal value systems, wherein female sexuality is not inherently stigmatised but understood as a part of a broader spectrum of the feminine energy. However, the narrative ultimately reasserts patriarchal control through the mechanism of redemption. Ahalya's liberation is conditioned upon the arrival of Rama, whose presence restores her to her former state (Valmiki 1.48). This final act of redemption, framed as divine intervention, reinforces the notion that female purity must be reinstated through suffering and male rescue.

Her penance is linked to purification, underscoring the moral economy at play. Ahalya's

prolonged isolation is recast as *tapas*, an ascetic discipline that ultimately redeems her. However, this framing obscures the coercive nature of her punishment, transforming an act of control into a narrative of spiritual growth. As Uma Chakravarti notes, Brahmanical patriarchy often employs such strategies to legitimise the subordination of women by embedding it within religious and moral discourse (34). It is of this ideological framework that Dasgupta's *Ahalya* seeks to dismantle. And by granting Ahalya narrative agency, Dasgupta reconfigures. Dasgupta's *Ahalya* is no longer a passive recipient of events but an active interpreter of her own life. Her desire is read and expressed rather than suppressed, her silence broken rather than imposed. Dasgupta's retelling challenges the traditional conflation of female desire with guilt. Desire is presented not as a moral failing but as an expression of selfhood, a means through which Ahalya negotiates her identity. This aligns with contemporary feminist thought, which seeks to reclaim female sexuality from patriarchal frameworks of control.

Revisionist Mythmaking in *Ahalya* by Koral Dasgupta

Contemporary retellings, particularly *Ahalya* by Koral Dasgupta, may be read as a deliberate act of narrative disruption. Such retellings do not merely revisit myth, but rather intervene in it, reworking inherited structures to foreground suppressed subjectivities. In this manner, Dasgupta's *Ahalya* participates in what Alicia Ostriker terms "revisionist mythmaking", a feminist strategy that reclaims canonical narrative by re-inscribing it with women's voices and experiences. Through this framework, Ahalya is no longer the passive sufferer and the silent recipient of patriarchal judgment but an articulate subject who reclaims both her desire and her narrative authority.

The revision of Dasgupta's *Ahalya* raises questions about voice: who speaks, who is spoken for, and who is silenced. In the traditional telling of *Ramayana*, Ahalya exists largely as an object within a moral narrative; her interiority is inaccessible, and her perspective is irrelevant. Her story is told about her, never from her. This narrative structure exemplifies what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously interrogates in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", the systematic silencing of marginalised voices within dominant discourse (271). Ahalya, in this sense, functions as a mythic subaltern whose experience is mediated and contained by patriarchal authority.

The act of giving Ahalya a voice, however, is not a simple reversal of silence; it is a shift of the narrative. In Dasgupta's text, voice is inseparable from interiority. This interior depth resists the flattening tendencies of mythic narration, where characters often function as symbolic types. Ahalya is no longer reducible to a moral category; she becomes legible as a thinking subject navigating desire, doubt, and consequence when she asks Brahma, "Who am I father?" Brahma describes her as "The face of my ambitions" (3). This shift aligns with postcolonial feminist efforts to foreground lived experience as a site of knowledge production, challenging the abstraction through which women have historically been represented (Mohanty).

In Dasgupta's *Ahalya*, upon being restored to human form, Ahalya begins to perceive the world from a human perspective. The Mist, however, chides her as a ruthless mother and tells her that, "You are just born, woman. Wait till you deserve what you desire" (33). Desire, in this framework, emerges as a central axis of re-signification. Traditional narratives either obscure Ahalya's desire or encode it as adultery, thereby preserving the moral coherence of the story. Dasgupta, by contrast, refuses to treat desire as a narrative problem to be resolved. Instead, desire is explored as a condition of being, ambiguous, unsettling, and irreducible to moral binaries. This approach resonates with feminist critiques that question the cultural insistence on disciplining female sexuality, revealing how such discipline is tied to broader structures of power (Menon 93). Ahalya's desire, in this sense, is not merely personal; it becomes a

site where cultural anxieties about females choosing for themselves are both acted upon and challenged.

A significant moment in Dasgupta's retelling occurs when Ahalya reflects upon Gautam's reaction: "Gautam may have noticed that. No shame or guilt must have shown on my face, because there was none" (166). This brief yet powerful statement invites readers to reconsider the conventional understanding of Ahalya as a figure defined by remorse and transgression. What stands out is not a denial of events but an absence of the guilt that others might expect her to feel. Ahalya's response suggests an awareness of her own experience that does not fully align with the moral judgments surrounding her. This tension encourages readers to reflect not only on Ahalya's experience but also on the broader processes through which societies define transgression and innocence.

Instead of constructing Ahalya as an object of judgment, Dasgupta's retelling transforms her into a subject of perception. This shift has significantly changed how power is conceptualised within the narrative. In earlier versions, authority is centralised in figures such as Gautama and Rama, whose judgement defines Ahalya's fate. By decentralising this authority and foregrounding *Ahalya's* own interpretation, power in this framework is no longer a monolithic force imposed from above but a network of relations within which *Ahalya* actively participates. This reconceptualisation aligns with Foucault's understanding of power as diffuse and relational rather than hierarchical (*History*94).

After her encounter with Indra, Brahma curses her and says, "You, Ahalya, will now suffer the same fate as I. You stripped me of my consciousness; you would be left here alone, ripped apart from your senses. Like a stone you will lie on the hard earth, inert and dormant... Like a rock you would remain fallen, separated from the *indriyas* that have been the force of attachment between you and Indra!" (171-172). Desire, mediated through the senses and the body, becomes central to Ahalya's attraction towards Indra. Gautama's curse, however, functions as an attempt to sever desire, rendering it a condition of denial and isolation.

Curse has been mentioned multiple times in the novel, indicating its importance in the life of Ahalya, as she was cursed by Rishi Gautama. The question of the curse, which in traditional narratives functions as an act of punishment, is retold in Dasgupta's text. Rather than presenting the curse as an unquestioned expression of divine or moral authority, the novel invites readers to consider its symbolic and psychological dimensions. This curse can be read as an externalisation of social judgement, a mechanism through which collective anxieties about female sexuality are imposed upon the individual. In this sense, the curse is less an act of divine justice than a cultural artefact, reflecting the values and fears of the society that produces it. Upon being cursed, Dasgupta's Ahalya states, "Taken aback by the undeserving curse I stared at Gautam with deep shock. But then what was so shocking? Hasn't power always made its best attempts to uproot voices?" (172). By shifting the focus from mythological to social, Dasgupta destabilises the legitimacy of the curse as a moral instrument. This destabilisation extends to the theme of redemption, which in traditional narratives is closely tied to the restoration of purity through suffering. Ahalya's redemption is typically mediated by Rama's arrival, whose presence absolves her of her sin and reintegrates her into the social order. Dasgupta reimagines this process by decentring Rama's role and emphasising Ahalya's own journey towards self-understanding. Redemption, in this context, is not an external gift but an internal process, grounded in self-recognition rather than divine intervention. This shift challenges the patriarchal assumption that women require external validation to achieve moral or social legitimacy. Dasgupta's *Ahalya* thus asks double questions: it critiques the silencing mechanisms of traditional narratives while simultaneously demonstrating the transformative potential of storytelling. The novel does not seek to replace one authoritative version with another; rather,

it foregrounds the multiplicity of perspectives that have always existed but have not always been acknowledged. Through this multiplicity, Ahalya emerges not as a fixed figure but as an evolving subject, whose story continues to resonate precisely because it resists closure.

Conclusion

The study has revisited the figure of Ahalya, not as a fixed mythological character but as a multidimensional site through which questions of gender, sexuality, and narrative authority can be re-examined. Ahalya's story has attracted diverse critical interpretations that highlight the complexities of gender, desire, and subjectivity in Dasgupta's retelling. What emerges from this layered rereading is not a singular, resolved understanding of Ahalya, but rather a recognition of her as a figure shaped by competing discourses that continue to evolve over time.

Ahalya's story thus serves as an example of how myth can function as both a repository and a producer of cultural knowledge about gender and sexuality. In conclusion, while recent scholarship has largely focused on recovering Ahalya's agency, this study shifts attention to the cultural processes through which female desire is constructed as transgressive. Bringing Foucault's regulation of sexuality into dialogue with Kristeva's concept of abjection, it reinterprets Ahalya's petrification as a form of social exclusion rather than mere punishment. Read through Ostriker's revisionist mythmaking, Dasgupta's retelling offers a more nuanced understanding of desire, guilt, and subjectivity within the Ahalya myth. In this sense, Ahalya is not merely a figure from the past but a continuing presence in the cultural imagination, one whose story invites us to question not only how narratives are constructed, but also who has the authority to construct them.

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