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Gender, Ecology, and Myth: Ecofeminist Perspectives on Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening*

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Abstract: This paper explores Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* through the twin lenses of ecocriticism and ecofeminism, focusing on how the novel brings together questions of nature, gender, and patriarchal authority within myth. In the story, Ahalya is cursed by her husband, Gautam, and turned into stone, a transformation that can be read as an ecological metaphor for silenced womanhood—motionless, voiceless, and reduced to mere landscape. Kane's retelling resists this traditional framing by challenging the patriarchal logic that equates women with nature to dominate both. Drawing on ecofeminist thought (Shiva, Plumwood) and ecocritical theory (Buell, Iovino, Alaimo), the study interprets Ahalya's petrification and subsequent awakening as symbolic acts that expose control while also reclaiming ecological and gendered agency. In doing so, the novel unsettles conventional binaries—man/woman, culture/nature, purity/pollution, and silence/voice—and opens up space for feminist environmental perspectives. In Hindu mythology, Ahalya is remembered as one of the Pancha Kanyas, and her story is told largely as one of transgression, punishment, and redemption by Rama. Kane reimagines her not as a passive sinner but as a resilient figure capable of self-reflection and renewal.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Patriarchy, Mythology, Gender and Ecology.

Introduction

Nature and culture are inseparable dimensions of the human environment, shaping how individuals perceive, interpret, and inhabit the world. The balance between these two forces influences how societies define their values, traditions, and relationships with the natural world. In literature, this interplay becomes a creative space where writers explore humanity's connection with nature and the ethical questions that arise from it. As Lawrence Buell observes, "An environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination, the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it" (2). This insight highlights how literary imagination plays a crucial role in shaping ecological awareness.

Ecocriticism, a contemporary literary approach, examines how texts represent ecological consciousness and the responsibilities of human beings toward their environment. As Cheryll Glotfelty explains, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment... Ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii). She further notes that "Ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it... As a



critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman” (xviii). These perspectives make it clear that literature does not exist in isolation but participates in a larger dialogue between the imagination, ethics, and the material world.

Throughout literary history, nature has consistently occupied a central position. From early literary traditions to modern writing, authors have engaged with the natural world as an essential aspect of the human experience. During the Romantic period, poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley presented nature as a living force that shapes emotion and thought. In the Indian context, the Ramayana and Mahabharata present nature as sacred and deeply intertwined with human life. Forests, rivers, and landscapes are not passive settings but active presences that influence events and character development. Figures such as Sita, Draupadi, Satyawati, and Surpanakha are closely associated with natural elements, reflecting a worldview in which human identity is inseparable from the ecological surroundings.

This recurring association between women and the natural world reveals a deeper cultural pattern in which both are viewed as life-giving and vulnerable to control. The treatment of these figures —whether revered, tested, or silenced— mirrors broader attitudes toward the environment. From this perspective, the marginalisation of women and the exploitation of nature can be seen as interconnected processes shaped by hierarchical systems that privilege dominance over balance. When read through this lens, mythological narratives begin to reveal not only cultural values but also the underlying structures of power.

The relationship between nature and identity becomes even more meaningful when considered in terms of lived experiences rather than abstract theory. In many traditional contexts, nature is not perceived as separate from human existence but as something that shapes our emotional, cultural, and ethical understanding. This interconnected worldview allows mythological narratives to be read not merely as stories of the past but as reflections of the ecological consciousness embedded within the cultural memory. In Ahalya’s Awakening, this connection is particularly significant, as the natural world functions both as a nurturing space and a site of loss, making Ahalya’s journey inseparable from the environments she inhabits.

Through this retelling, Kane restores Ahalya’s voice and reimagines her as a figure capable of reflection and transformation. Many contemporary writers revisit mythological narratives by focusing on marginalized characters and unexplored perspectives. Among them, Kane stands out for her sustained engagement with female voices in the epics. This study examines Ahalya’s Awakening as a narrative that moves beyond the traditional portrayal of Ahalya as a passive figure and instead presents her as someone who negotiates identity, agency, and belonging within both social and ecological frameworks.

Most of Kane’s works explore questions of gender and identity while remaining closely connected to natural settings such as forests and landscapes. These environments are not merely decorative but play an integral role in shaping the narrative. As Vandana Shiva observes, “All existence arises from this primordial energy which is the substance of everything, pervading everything. The manifestation of this power, this energy, is called nature (Prakriti)... Nature, both animate and inanimate, is thus an expression of Shakti” (37). This idea helps illuminate how the novel presents nature not as passive matter but as a dynamic and life-affirming force, closely linked to feminine energy and creativity.

Ahalya’s Myth: Traditional Representations



In almost all vernacular versions of the Ramayana, the story of Ahalya follows a broadly similar pattern: Indra, the king of the gods, deceives and seduces Ahalya, and both are subsequently cursed by Sage Gautam. Despite its familiarity, this narrative is marked by significant silences, particularly regarding Ahalya's life before and after marriage. Traditional accounts offer little insight into her thoughts, emotions, or circumstances, presenting her through a limited moral framework. It is precisely this narrative gap that Kavita Kane explores in Ahalya's Awakening. Rather than creating an entirely new storyline, Kane revisits the existing myth and reinterprets it from a contemporary perspective, drawing attention to what has been omitted or overlooked in earlier retellings.

According to the Valmiki Ramayana, Ahalya was created by Brahma as the most beautiful woman on earth. Her beauty attracts the attention of kings, sages, and even celestial beings, all of whom wish to marry her. To prevent conflict among them, Brahma chooses Sage Gautam as her husband, believing that his wisdom and ascetic discipline would provide balance to her extraordinary beauty. However, this seemingly harmonious union soon gives way to a tragedy. Driven by desire, Indra disguises himself as Gautama and approaches Ahalya, leading to the act that results in her curse. When Gautam discovers the deception, he curses Indra and condemns Ahalya to become stone, rendering her invisible and isolated until she is eventually redeemed by Rama's touch.

This version of the myth, widely circulated through oral and written traditions, establishes a narrative centered on transgression, punishment, and redemption. Across different retellings—from Valmiki's Sanskrit epic to regional adaptations such as Kamban's Ramavataram in Tamil and Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas in Hindi—the core structure remains the same. However, the tone and interpretation of Ahalya's role vary significantly. While Valmiki's account tends to emphasize her culpability, later versions adopt a more sympathetic stance, focusing on forgiveness and spiritual purification instead. These shifts reflect changing cultural and moral perspectives, demonstrating that the story has never been entirely fixed but has evolved over time in response to different social contexts and conditions.

Yet, despite these variations, one aspect remains largely unchanged: the absence of Ahalya's own voice. In most traditional narratives, her experience is filtered through male perspectives, and her identity is defined by her supposed error or eventual redemption. She is positioned as an object of moral judgment rather than as a subject capable of being interpreted. This absence is not merely a narrative omission but reflects a broader pattern within mythological storytelling, where women are often spoken about rather than allowed to speak.

In this light, the silence surrounding Ahalya becomes as significant as the events of the story itself. This raises important questions about whose voices are preserved in cultural narratives and whose are excluded. By foregrounding this silence, the myth opens up possibilities for reinterpretation, inviting readers to consider alternative ways of understanding Ahalya's experience beyond guilt and punishment.

Kavita Kane's Ahalya's Awakening enters this long tradition of retellings not to reject the original myth but to engage with it critically. Her narrative shifts the focus from external judgment to internal consciousness, allowing Ahalya to emerge as a thinking, reflective individual. By giving voice to her inner life—her doubts, emotions, and reasoning—Kane transforms the story from a moral lesson into one of self-awareness and growth.

In doing so, the retelling challenges the assumptions that have shaped earlier versions of the myth. Ahalya is no longer defined solely by the act that leads to her curse; instead, she is presented as someone navigating complex emotional and social realities. This shift is



significant because it reframes the myth not as a story of failure but as one of understanding and transformation. Kane's version thus repositions Ahalya as a central consciousness within the narrative, allowing her to reclaim the dignity and agency that traditional accounts had denied her.

Literature Review

The intersection of gender, ecology, and mythology has received increasing attention in recent literary studies, particularly within the frameworks of ecocriticism and ecofeminism. Scholars have increasingly examined how literary texts engage with ecological concerns while reflecting broader social and cultural structures. Early ecocritical studies emphasized the representation of the natural world in literature and humans' ethical responsibilities toward the environment. Over time, this approach has expanded to include questions of power, identity, and cultural representation, highlighting the ways in which environmental concerns are closely linked to social hierarchies.

Ecofeminist criticism further develops this perspective by examining the parallel between women's subordination and nature's exploitation. For instance, Vandana Shiva's work foregrounds the idea that patriarchal systems often construct women and nature within similar frameworks of control and marginalization. Her emphasis on Prakriti as a dynamic and life-sustaining force challenges the notion of nature as passive matter, suggesting that it embodies creative and regenerative energy. Similarly, Plumwood critiques the dualistic thinking that separates culture from nature and positions women and the environment as inferior to male-dominated structures. These theoretical contributions provide a foundation for understanding how literary texts reveal deeper ideological patterns embedded within cultural narratives.

In the context of Indian mythological fiction, recent scholarship has increasingly focused on retellings that foreground marginalized voices in the text. Studies by Anu and Deepa (2024) and Rana (2025) examine how contemporary narratives reinterpret mythological characters through ecofeminist perspectives, highlighting the interconnectedness of gender and environmental concerns. These studies further emphasize that mythological retellings function as critical reinterpretations that challenge established narrative authorities.

Kavita Kane's novels have attracted attention for their focus on female characters often sidelined in traditional epics. Critics have noted that her retellings provide psychological depth and narrative agency to these figures, allowing them to articulate their experiences. While existing studies primarily explore themes of gender, identity, and agency in her works, the ecological dimensions of her narratives have received comparatively less attention. Her use of natural settings—forests, rivers, and landscapes—suggests a deeper engagement with ecological symbolism that remains underexplored in the current scholarship.

Moreover, discussions on mythological reinterpretation have highlighted how retellings function as sites of resistance where dominant narratives are questioned and reconfigured. By shifting the focus from divine authority to human experience, such narratives create space for alternative voices and perspectives to be heard. However, a gap remains in examining how these reinterpretations simultaneously engage with ecological concerns alongside gendered experiences.

This study addresses this gap by analyzing Ahalya's Awakening through an integrated ecofeminist and ecocritical framework. By focusing on Ahalya's transformation, silence, and awakening, this paper explores how the novel redefines the relationship between women and nature while also challenging patriarchal interpretations of myth. This study contributes to



ongoing discussions on mythological retellings, gender, and ecological consciousness, offering a nuanced understanding of how these elements intersect within contemporary Indian literature.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to examine Kavita Kane's Ahalya's Awakening, focusing on the intersections of gender, ecology, and mythology. The analysis is grounded in textual interpretation, where close reading is used as the primary method to explore the narrative structure, character development, and symbolic representations within the text.

This study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks: ecocriticism and ecofeminism. Ecocriticism enables an examination of how the natural world is represented in the narrative and how ecological elements function beyond mere settings, shaping the emotional and intellectual dimensions of the protagonist's journey. In contrast, ecofeminism provides a critical lens for understanding the interconnected forms of marginalization experienced by women and nature, particularly within patriarchal structures. Together, these approaches allow for a more integrated reading of the text, where environmental and gendered concerns are analyzed in relation to each other rather than as separate categories.

This study employs a close textual analysis of key episodes in the novel, including Ahalya's life in the ashram, her displacement after marriage, her transformation into stone, and her eventual awakening. These moments are examined for their symbolic significance, particularly in relation to the themes of silence, identity, and resistance. Quotations from the primary text were used to support the analysis, ensuring that the interpretations remained grounded in the narrative.

In addition to primary textual analysis, this study engages with relevant secondary sources, including critical works on ecocriticism and ecofeminism, as well as recent scholarship on mythological retellings in Indian literature. These sources provide a theoretical foundation that supports the interpretation and situates the study within existing academic discussions.

Rather than aiming to produce a definitive interpretation, this methodology acknowledges the open-ended nature of the literary texts. This analysis seeks to highlight how meaning is constructed through narrative gaps, symbolic representations, and shifting perspectives. In this context, Ahalya is approached as a figure shaped by both silence and articulation, allowing the study to explore how reinterpretation can transform a traditionally marginalized character into a site of agency and critical self-reflection.

Analysis and Discussion

Ahalya's Journey as a Process of Becoming

Rather than treating Ahalya's story as a closed narrative of sin and redemption, the retelling opens it up as a process of becoming, where identity is shaped through experience, reflection, and interaction with the surrounding world. This shift in focus admits the narrative to move beyond moral judgment and instead explore the conditions that produce silence and awakening. Ahalya's journey can thus be understood not as a singular event but as a layered transformation, where external circumstances and internal realizations continuously interact. The natural world plays a crucial role in this process, functioning not merely as a backdrop but as an active presence that shapes her consciousness at every stage. This perspective also permits the narrative to be read as an ongoing negotiation between imposed identity and self-realised identity, where transformation is gradual rather than instantaneous.

The Ashram as an Ecological and Intellectual Space



Ahalya's early life in the forested ashram forms the foundation of her identity. The ashram is not just a physical setting; it becomes the formative ground for her intellectual, emotional, and moral development. The presence of trees, sacred groves, birds, silence, and flowing rivers creates a harmonious environment that nurtures their ability to think, reflect, and learn. This ecological setting allows her to grow in a space where knowledge and nature are deeply interlinked. In this sense, the ashram represents a model of balanced existence in which learning is not detached from life but emerges from continuous engagement with the environment.

Gautam's recognition of her intellectual potential reinforces this notion. As he tells her, "People often assume that the most famous figures of ancient times were men, be it rishis or rulers. But there have been several women seers who have excelled equally... learning, my dear, has no gender or caste or class. You worship knowledge, and you are blessed with wisdom" (89). This moment affirms that knowledge is not restricted by gender, placing Ahalya within a tradition of intellectual and spiritual inquiry. However, this early affirmation also contrasts with her later silencing, revealing how patriarchal systems can simultaneously recognize and suppress women's potential.

Displacement and Ecological Alienation

However, Ahalya's departure from the ashram after her marriage marks a significant break. This transition is not merely physical but deeply emotional, as she is removed from the ecological space that shapes her sense of self. The discomfort she experiences reflects a subtle but important form of social alienation. Her movement away from the forest signals the beginning of a gradual confinement within social structures that limit autonomy. This moment can be read as the first stage of her transformation, where her disconnection from nature parallels the beginning of social restriction. This displacement suggests that the loss of connection with nature is closely related to emotional and psychological unease. Ahalya's inner disturbance is not simply a reaction to marriage but an indication of her separation from an environment that once provided her with balance and clarity. The narrative thus presents alienation not as a sudden condition but as a slow process that unfolds through spatial and emotional dislocations.

The Stone as a Symbol of Silence and Endurance

Ahalya's transformation into stone represents the peak of this confinement. Initially, it appears as a symbol of complete silence and immobility, reflecting the erasure of voice, movement, and agency. The curse reduces her to a state where she is no longer recognized as an active presence but as an object in the landscape. This reduction marks a shift from subjecthood to objecthood, where identity is defined externally rather than internally. However, this stillness does not remain empty. Over time, it began to take on new meanings. The stone represents not only suppression but also endurance—the capacity to persist even in conditions of extreme restriction. What initially appears as an absence gradually becomes a space of accumulation, where awareness gathers strength. The curse strips her of agency in the same way that nature is often treated as passive and available for control by men. However, within this imposed stillness, an awareness continues to exist.

Inner Consciousness and Suppressed Vitality

Even in her stone form, Ahalya's inner consciousness is active. She continues to think, reflect, and question, suggesting that her identity cannot be completely erased. The narrative presents this condition as one in which suppressed vitality persists below the surface. This persistence challenges the assumption that silence equals absence, revealing a hidden



continuity of thought and feeling. As Vandana Shiva explains, “All existence arises from this primordial energy which is the substance of everything, pervading everything. The manifestation of this power, this energy, is called nature (Prakriti)... Nature, both animate and inanimate, is thus an expression of Shakti” (37). Seen in this light, Ahalya’s stillness contains an underlying energy that resists complete erasure and points toward eventual renewal.

Patriarchal Authority and Mythic Power Structures

The curse reflects a broader structure of authority in which decisions about a woman’s body and identity are controlled by patriarchal power. Gautam’s act is not simply personal anger but part of a larger cultural logic in which authority determines value and meaning. This moment reveals how power operates not only through action but also through the ability to define reality for others. This dynamic reveals how both women and nature are positioned as objects of control. The transformation into stone becomes a symbolic representation of this logic, where agency is removed and identity is redefined according to external judgment. Such control transforms living presence into inert existence, reinforcing the hierarchical divisions between the subject and the object.

Silence as Reflection and Resistance

Despite being imposed, Ahalya’s silence becomes a space for reflection. Rather than remaining passive, she engages with her condition, developing a deeper awareness of the structures that confine her. When she states, “I remain in the forest, away from man’s rules and falseness” (349), she articulates a clear distinction between the natural world and society’s rigid expectations. This awareness marks the beginning of resistance, rooted not in outward defiance but in an inward clarity. Therefore, her silence transforms into a form of resistance—not through action but through understanding. It allows her to reconsider the values imposed upon her and reconstruct her sense of self beyond those limitations.

The Forest as a Space of Renewal

The forest plays a central role in Ahalya’s awakening. It functions as a space where she is able to reflect, heal, and redefine her identity. Unlike the structured world of social norms, the forest offers openness and acceptance, allowing her to exist without judgment. This openness allows for a different mode of being, where identity is not imposed but discovered. Her realization —“It was in the forest that I found my mistake, my fidelity, my recovery, my rumination” (349)—suggests that her transformation is not dependent solely on external intervention but emerges from an internal process shaped by her interaction with the natural world. The forest thus becomes an active agent in her awakening, facilitating both emotional healing and intellectual clarity.

Awakening as Self-Realisation and Expansion

Ahalya’s awakening marks the culmination of this journey. It is not simply a moment of release but a transformation in how she understands herself and the world. When she reflects that “Women are not told that they also belong to a bigger world—of freedom, of knowledge, of passion, of ambition” (340), she recognizes the limitations that have been imposed upon her. This realization expands her sense of identity beyond the socially prescribed boundaries. Her critique that “Societal expectations are hypocritical... they enjoy a woman being subjugated” (344) further demonstrates her awareness of the structures that sustain inequality. Her awakening, therefore, becomes both personal and political, linking individual experience to larger social realities.

Myth as Resistance and Reinterpretation



Kane's retelling ultimately transforms the myth into a form of resistance. By giving Ahalya control over her narrative, the story shifts away from traditional interpretations that center on guilt and redemption. Instead, it becomes a narrative of understanding and agency for the women. This reinterpretation challenges the authority of inherited narratives and opens up space for alternative readings. Ahalya emerges as a figure who interprets her experiences, challenging the authority of earlier narratives. Her awakening is not something granted to her but something she achieves through reflection and self-awareness.

Contemporary Relevance

Although rooted in mythology, Ahalya's story resonates strongly with contemporary realities, where questions of agency, voice, and autonomy continue to shape women's experiences, suggesting that myth remains relevant as a lens through which present conditions can be understood. Similarly, the disruption of the ecological balance reflects broader patterns of control and exploitation. By drawing these parallels, the narrative connects the past and present, showing how inherited structures continue to influence modern realities.

Conclusion

Ahalya's Awakening reshapes a familiar myth into a narrative of ecological awareness and feminist empowerment. Kane challenges the traditional moral lens through which Ahalya has long been viewed and instead emphasizes her inner strength and spiritual clarity. The novel shows how myths can evolve, offering new meanings that question injustice and illuminate overlooked dimensions of gender and nature. The novel underscores the interconnected forms of marginalization that shape both gendered and ecological realities under patriarchal structures. Ahalya's stone form symbolizes this suppression, while her forest-based renewal highlights the possibility of healing and transformation. Her awakening marks the return of agency and Shakti, aligning with ecofeminist insights from Shiva and Plumwood, who argue that patriarchal worldviews undermine feminine and ecological energies in parallel ways. By situating Ahalya's suffering and recovery within the forest, Kane underscores nature's role as witness, teacher, and source of truth. The novel thus contributes to feminist ecological discourse and affirms that revisiting mythological narratives enables the recovery of silenced voices, while re-establishing the connection between gender, ecology, and cultural memory. In reimagining Ahalya's story, the narrative ultimately shifts the focus from judgment to understanding, from punishment to transformation. It highlights the importance of listening to voices that have long remained unheard and recognizing the deeper connections that link individual experience with broader cultural and ecological realities.

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