



# Ahalya: The Enigma of Purity and Pollution - Intertextuality Between Valmiki's Ahalya and Other Ahalyas

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**Abstract**— *The parallels and variations between discourses in the form of a novel, a short story, and a short film with the shared theme and characters from the legendary story Ahalya, an excerpt from The Ramayana, sparked this study. The originality of these works that observed the hipogram (prior literary works) was deemed greater in this study. Intertextuality, on the other hand, is essentially a study of an author's level of originality in creating a new literary work after reading earlier literary works. The purpose of this study was to describe intertextuality in terms of similarities and differences as seen through the lens of expansion and alteration. This study was a qualitative investigation with a descriptive method. The findings of this study revealed that the hipograms (the tale of Ahalya) have an intertextuality relationship with the epic Ramayana by Valmiki and are viewed from the perspective of feminism.*



**Keywords**— *Intertextuality; Ahalya's Tale; the Ramayana; Several Discourses*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Mythology is a gem of historical civilization, and all past civilizations had their own mythology. Even today, mythology is valued in every culture around the world. Indian as well as Greek mythology are widely read myths today, as well as always. As stated by the French theorist Laurent Jenny, there are some writings that are explicitly intertextual and others that are not.

In India and around the world innumerable seminars, poetic discourses, debates presentations and conferences have been on in English and in regional languages and also a lot of discourses have intertextuality with the Ramayana around the globe. (Shet, 2021) Not only the whole of The Ramayana but, even extracts of it are told, retold or recreated million times. One such episode is the tale of Ahalya.

Ahalya's story is told in several versions of the Ramayana and several Hindu Puranas, as well as vernacular literature, dance dramas, plays, and other adaptations. The story of

Ahalya is told in traditional versions to glorify and demonstrate Lord Rama's divine qualities and humanitarian gestures. Many current renditions of the narrative are told from the perspective of the gender to highlight the unequal and unjust treatment of women in traditional Hindu culture.

As stated in numerous Hindu scriptures, Ahalya was lured by Indra (the lord of the Gods), who had a long-held romantic interest in her. Numerous accounts forgive Ahalya of her guilt, claiming that she was duped by Indra's cunning and succumbed to his overtures. In one story, Indra requested the assistance of the moon, who appeared at midnight disguised as a cock crowed. Gautama stepped out, thinking it was time for morning ablutions, and Indra took advantage of the occasion by dressing up as Gautama and seducing her.

But she was cursed by Gautama to be a stone for many years. Madame Bovary's death is comparable to Ahalya's immovable curse. The following description is an example of male chauvinism taken from the death-bed scene:

"The priest dipped his right thumb in the oil and began the functions; first on the eyes, which had so coveted all earthly splendors; then on the nostrils, which had loved warm breezes and amorous perfumes; then on the mouth, which had opened for falsehood; had groaned with pride and cried out in lust; finally on the soles of the feet, which had once run so swiftly to the assuaging of her desires, and now would walk no more." (345)

Intertextuality has been extensively studied, yet there is a glaring gap in its examination as a cross-cultural phenomenon, specifically for Indian literary works. Hence, this study, which investigates the relationship between the legendary tale of Ahalya and selected discourses employs intertextuality as a hermeneutical technique that allows for an exploration of the thematic echoes between the tale and the discourses. Also, it investigates to verify whether in other renditions of the narrative, whether Ahalya is severely cursed/punished for her infidelity.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many research studies on intertextuality in general and comparative analysis of Ahalya's character with characters from other discourses who were accused of sinning or being sinned against.

Shet's (2021) study investigated intertextuality between Indian films and Indian epic, *The Ramayana*. Abood (2015), Sirhan (2014), Ayasrah & Azmi (2019), and Sultan and Rai'a (2007) chose Arabic poetry and looked at the intertextuality between it and T. S. Elliot's poetry. On Darwish's poems also there were numerous studies of intertextuality. (Halabi & Alawi, 2021, Issa & Daragmeh, 2018 and Snir, 2008).

Shet's (2021) study explored the way the Ramayana, one of India's two great epics, was contextually borrowed in contemporary Indian films Ravana in Tamil (Ravana in Hindi), Ravana Prabhu. (Malayalam), and Judgmental Hai Kya (Hindi, 2019), as well as Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography. The research extended into many of its adaptations, interpretations, and excerpts in Indian, World, and Renaissance literature and visual arts, as well as contemporary works.

With reference to T. S. Eliot and Al Sayyab, the aim of Ayasrah & Azmi's (2019) study was to provide light on "intertextuality" as a cross-cultural strategy between contemporary Arabic and English poetry. It intended to shed light on how Eliot and Al Sayyab's texts interact in terms of "allusion," "symbols and myths," "irony," "the objective equivalent," "conceptual metaphor," and "impersonality," as well as the influence of Eliot's ideas, subjects, and writing style on Al Sayyab's. However, the

research showed that the intertextuality technique only works in one direction, i.e., from Eliot to Al Sayyab, and Eliot's influence can be clearly seen in Al Sayyab's poetry. Al Sayyab has also appropriated some of Eliot's most important phrases, concepts, symbols, myths, and themes, but he could still use intertextuality effectively and keep his eminent style.

Here are some accurate comparisons of Ahalya's personality. The first one focuses on Puthumai Pithan's two short stories. The second contrast is between Ahalya and Madame Bovary.

Arulmugil's (n.d.) study the two tales of Puthumai Pithan that are based on the life of Ahalya "*Ahalikai*" and "*Sabavimochanam*". These tales reveal how the same author gave the Ahalya myth two different interpretations. The awful fate of Ahalya was shown in both tales in many ways; essentially, she was unable to identify Indra. Her utter devotion to her husband was evident. In the former tale, it was described how Gautama pardoned Indra and Ahalya; in the later tale, Ahalya was brought back to life by Rama's touch, but society never accepted her. Finally, she concluded that Rama was not the ideal person to grant her redemption because he had harmed the innocent Sita and caused Ahalya to turn back into stone. Arulmugil concludes his study by saying the redemption of Ahalya is emphasized in both the tales. A calm analysis of such circumstances would reveal that they are merely representations of obstacles we encounter daily. The moral tests they contain are there for our benefit. The Ahalya story teaches us that, no matter how serious a transgression is, one can still aspire to be absolved from its effects via repentance and punishment. We should examine our own souls and work to rid them of all negative thoughts rather than judging others for their transgressions. The only difference between Ahalya and Madame Bovary, according to Swathika (2016), is in the narrations of their stories. Ahalya's myth did not articulate her opinions and desires, whereas Madame Bovary's voice wandered throughout the book but is never appropriately addressed. Both women conceptualized their husbands as their own dreams of adoration hoping for a new life, failing to which they fell into the act of transgressions. Madame Bovary and Ahalya were both trapped in the moral code disparities, or the conceptions that primarily benefited men and neglected to include these women by marginalizing their perspectives.

This study examines feminism in Kavita Kane's novel Ahalya's Awakening. The study investigates the way the rhetoric of a mythological character rises and challenges society's patriarchal notions. It delves into the multifaceted exploitation of women, as well as their difficulties, sorrows, and subjection in a patriarchal culture.

Although intertextuality has received much investigation, few scholars have examined it in Indian myths, stories, and epics. This research probes into the conceptual resonances between, the tale of Ahalya and the discourses that were named after the tale's female protagonist Ahalya.

### III. METHODOLOGY

After reading Koral Das Gupta's Ahalya and Kavitha Kane's Ahalya Awakening, seeing Sujoy Gosh's short film Ahalya, and studying the original Valmiki story Ahalya, the essential cross points between the creators are found and examined to extract the shared sequences. Additionally, the characteristics of their intertextuality are used to define the parameters of the comparison tale for this phenomenon. The qualitative data analysis method is used to analyze the study's data because it works with literary materials. As a result, the reciprocal intertextual scenes are identified and categorized according to the appropriate pattern of "objectivity, sinned/sinned against." Examining and analyzing the stories allows for an investigation into each of these factors. The results are then concluded and discussed to arrive at the conclusions.

### IV. RESULTS

#### Intertextuality

Julia Kristeva first used it in 1966 when she said that many concepts, ideas, and meanings are intersectional. She also asserts that since texts are intertextual and each one contains another, there is no such thing as brand-new, original text. Since every literary text is influenced by other earlier writings, Kristeva also holds that one author cannot produce a literary work entirely on their own (Allen, 2011). Also, Julia Kristeva, the French sophist, defines a discourse as "a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva, 1986, p. 66).

According to Gadavani (2002), intertextuality is a tool that creates an overlapping between texts and fosters a culture of understanding among various text types. Intertextuality is a key technique used by poets when creating new poetry, stories, novels, plays, and even spoken texts. The listener is not presented with the author's literary thoughts with the same ease as in spoken language. The splendour of literary style, which frequently conceals indirect messages and generates unseen interpretations to convey them to the writer and his audience, is what sets it apart from everyday language (Fabb, 2010). Intertextuality may nevertheless present many different forms, including plagiarism, insinuation, citation, interpretation, pastiche, and spoofing (Hallo, 2010). The three areas of intertextuality are

obligatory, facultative, and accidental. The intertextuality can be explicit or implicit one.

#### Selected Works

The following three discourses were studied to investigate whether they have intertextuality with the tale of Ahalya in *The Ramayana*. Sujoy Ghosh's 14-minute short film *Ahalya, short stories: Kavitha Kane's Ahalya Awakening (2019)* and Koral Dasgupta's *Ahalya (2020)*

The following are the results of intertextuality between the chosen discourses and Valmiki's Ramayana

#### Ghosh's Ahalya

Sujoy Ghosh, best known for his 2012 film *Kahaani*, has written a script with a scary twist at the final moments. The short film begins with the ringing of a calling bell, and an investigating officer searching for a missing individual enters the home of Goutam Sadhu, a well-known artist, to question him. The lovely Ahalya (Radhika Apte) opens the door. The film is based on Ahalya's fabled story. In the Ramayana, Ahalya, the most beautiful of Lord Brahma's creations, marries Gautama, a much older sage. Lord Indra, who is smitten by her beauty, disguises himself as her husband and attempts to seduce her. The sage curses Ahalya and Indra for the former's infidelity. Ahalya is transformed into a stone, only when Ram's foot contacts the cursed stone that is Ahalya after the curse, she is freed from the spell. In Sujoy Ghosh's short film, the heroine, who is also named Ahalya, is an outstanding beauty, much like the mythical Ahalya. Her husband's name is likewise Gautam Sadhu, and the third significant character, the inspector, is called after Lord Indra. Sujoy, on the other hand, the filmmaker brilliantly weaves myth and legend, employs all props, and creates a masterpiece of tale that articulates of an iconoclastic yearning to abolish patriarchal preconceptions. Seducers are punished and transformed into statues.

#### Koral Dasgupta's Ahalya

Author Koral Dasgupta shifts the focus to another sexual relationship altogether. Koral ventures to an alternative reading of Ahalya's character. (Sahu, 2020)

The story of Ahalya is beautifully summarized by the author as:

*It is just one single moment of weakness, that momentary lapse of judgement – that is all it takes for us to make us lose our all in our struggle between good and bad, right and wrong, allowing the wrong to win.*

The book, which is based on Indian mythology, is phenomenal. The writer excels in describing emotions in

detail. The narrative has several references to adulteries, particularly those committed by Indra. However, the author recognizes the boundary between sensuality and vulgarity. In these aspects, not a single sentence needs to be altered. But there are several fascinating areas where the emotions and togetherness between a male and female are explored. For that, the reader needs to have respect for the author.

The depiction of Ahalya has profound implications in today's culture since she raises concerns which eventually form the foundation for contemporary feminist thought. Kavita Kane succeeded in doing the story courtesy by detailing the justifications for the three main characters Ahalya, Gautam and Indra. choices and the three's friendship.

#### Kane's Ahalya

Kane draws attention to a brief passage from Hindu mythology and emphasizes its applicability to contemporary societies struggling with issues like adultery, loyalty, divorce, and patriarchy. She portrays Ahalya as an aspirational lady seeking an identity apart from her appealing looks. Ahalya, the royal daughter of King Mudgal and Queen Nalayani, is not merely gorgeous, but also courageous and intellectual. Her mother intends for Ahalya to marry Indra Shakra, but Ahalya has different goals and desires. Unlike other female members of the royal family, she desires to further her education. She aspires to be a skilled rishika. Her dreams are faced with strong opposition. As their kingdom prepares for war with their neighbours, she is transported to Gautama rishi's ashram for safety. We observe Ahalya's life blooming as a student, a learner, and eventually as a wife and mother in the ashram. The husband-wife relationship deteriorates over time as Gautama strives to balance his roles as a guru and a husband. When Indra learns Ahalya's solitude and cravings, Fate plays a wicked game. He enters her chamber, disguised as Gautama. Despite knowing who the man lying next to her is, Ahalya falls into the arms of the man who has been pursuing her for a long time. The curse of an infuriated Gautama transforms her into stone. Rama liberates her after she lives in great penance. However, Ahalya's journey does not stop there in Kané's rendition. Years later, she runs upon Sita, who has relocated to the forests with her sons. The unexpected meeting of these two powerful women, who have been stigmatised by society and abandoned by their loved ones, concludes Ahalya's Awakening perfectly. Even though Ahalya's narrative is well known, Ahalya's Awakening does not portray Ahalya as a victim. The readers are introduced through Kavita Kané's interpretation.

Even though Ahalya's narrative is well known, Ahalya's Awakening does not portray Ahalya as a victim. Kavita Kané's interpretation introduces readers to a brave lady who

is not afraid to admit her weaknesses; she is aware of her desires, transgressions, and repercussions. Ultimately, a decent retelling of a renowned legendary story, with a fresh take on a character who has typically been portrayed as a modest woman.

Also, Ahalya has intertextuality with the Greek Mythological character Daphane. In Greek mythology, Apollo, Zeus's son, pursued Daphne, a young nymph. "Daphne prayed for help from the river God Peneus or Gaia" (Schipper 2). And she is transformed into a tree, 'Laurel' (Barnard 137). Legend has it that her feet changed into roots, her hair into leaves, and her arms were transformed into branches. Her busts morph into the tree's thin bark. But her innocence and radiant attractiveness survived undamaged in the case. The *Metamorphoses* is a narrative poem written by the great Roman poet Ovid (43 BC - 17 or 18 CE). The book is a mythic-historical narrative that describes the Creation of the World and continues to the time of Julius Caesar (Schipper 1-6). Daphne's story is presented in this work of literature. Generally, both mythologies are quite identical. In Greek mythology, the Gods live in Mount Olympus, and the Titans were the antithesis of the Gods. In Hindu culture, Devas are the Gods and the Asuras are their chief enemies who reside in the Hell. In the week Thursday is the day of Zeus as well as Indra, and both are kings of Gods, and they have the same weapon too, the thunder (Schipper 1-6).

## V. DISCUSSION

The investigation into the various discourses reveals that *Ahalyas* are objectified, humiliated, and cursed whether they are Indian or Greek, ancient or modern replicas of the legendary Ahalya. The female heroes in *Daphane* and *The Ramayana* are cursed to immobility, while the male perpetrators escape the harsh punishment. The present-day short film, despite attempting to add a feminist touch by turning the male actors into statues, has done nothing to justify the innocent legendary Ahalya, as in this brief movie she turns out to be the seducer of not only the so-called Indra, but also many others. In Kavita Kane's novel *Ahalya's Awakening*, Ahalya gets frustrated with her spouse's lack of interest, and she willingly and knowingly accepts Indra, who has disguised himself as Gautam. Similarly, Koral instills postmodern concepts in Ahalya. According to her, Ahalya is a pleasure seeker.

When Rishi Gautam curses her to become a lifeless stone because of her 'infidelity,' Koral Dasgupta's Ahalya asks, "Long, long ago, when I was still a beginner who was pursuing an identity without a body, I had asked, would the greatest lover known for his rugged energies make love with the soul?" Indra had abandoned his physical form to become

a shapeless identity, casting the same challenge back at me and yet fulfilling it in style, beyond the bounds of time, as no cosmic lover had ever done!" (Ahalya/Koral Dasgupta)

Despite Sujoy Ghosh, the filmmaker brilliantly weaves myth and legend, employing all props, and creating a masterpiece of tale that articulates of an iconoclastic yearning to abolish patriarchal preconceptions, as commended by Narayan, (2022) the director's account is unclear as to whether Gautama uses Ahalya's attractiveness or Ahalya uses Gautama's stature to entice men to her bed. What is heartening is that Ahalya is neither cursed with immovability nor portrayed as a victim. Men are condemned with immovability for their wickedness in Sujoy Ghosh's short film. However she is objectified in Sujoy Ghosh's film too, as opined by Gauri Lankesh. (Mirror, 2015) And that was the reason Ghosh's modern day version of Ahalya seems to have hurt the sentiments of a certain Hindu organisation, the Akhil Bharatvarshiya Shree Gurjar Gaud Brahmin Samaj, that clamoured a ban on the movie. (Radhika Apte as Sexy Ahalya to Be Banned? Sujoy Ghosh's Chilling Thriller Runs Into Trouble, 2015)

Not only is the legendary Ahalya blamed and cursed by her husband, but contemporary writers also struggle to defend the character despite their desire to do so. The language of a mythological character rises and challenges society's patriarchal ideals in Kavita Kane's novel *Ahalya's Awakening*. It explores women's varied exploitation as well as their struggles, grief, and subjugation in patriarchal societies. Although it is uplifting that authors are contributing to Ahalya's cause, it is disappointing to see that even the two female writers portray Ahalya in a sensual and sexual way.

In *Kambaramayana* the lines reiterate Valmiki's charge "and she knew. Yet unable to put aside what was not hers," (Many *Ramayanas*, n.d.)

Whereas ancient versions of *The Ramayana*, unlike *Kamba Ramayana*, demonstrate her innocence. (Mirror, 2015) For instance, *Brahma Purana* claims that Ahalya did not recognize Indra. When Indra used to visit the ashram of the sage Gautama, Gautama's disciples failed to recognize him. (*Hidden Secrets of Ahalya's Story in the Ramayana*, 2023) Also there are many who keep trying to proclaim her innocence:

*When Lord Rama declares Ahalya to be innocent centuries later, Gautama makes a comeback and takes Ahalya back. (Arunima. 2018b, January 22).*

Agaligai recounts the actual incident of Ahalya being seduced by Indra, but it also adds a strange twist of its own. Here, Gautama absolved Ahalya and Indra of their errors. One day, Indra lured Gautama away while she was still half asleep by crowing like a cock. When she realized it was

Indra, she was utterly taken aback. She struck him while "squirming and shaking like a worm that has fallen into fire" (Pudumai Pithan 2000, pp. 131–135). The insightful words of Gautama, "A pure mind alone is true chastity," calmed Ahalya. What can a powerless lady do if her body has been contaminated by chance? (Pudumaippittan 2000:131–135).

According to its etymology, Ahalya refers to someone who is unplowed, pure, or who possesses tremendous beauty and morality. As the wife of a revered and religious sage, she symbolizes a very unusual and complex character in Hindu popular lore. She is also praised for being a Sati and one of the noble Pancha Kanyas. Moreover, Ram worships her after her salvation. (*Hidden Secrets of Ahalya's Story in the Ramayana*, 2023 & Arunima, 2018) In that case it is proven she is innocent and she is wronged against innumerable times by most of the adaptations and renditions of her tale, even if the texts take a gender perspective.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Ahalya is cursed by her spouse after being duped by the disguised Indra. The goal of this study was to determine whether her purity is recognized by modern society or whether she is still blamed. The study also probed: Is there intertextuality in the renditions, adaptations of Ahalya?

As far as intertextuality is concerned the study proves that there are other renditions of the narrative of Ahalya, nonetheless in all of them, Ahalya is severely punished for her infidelity. This study finds intertextuality between Valmiki's Ahalya, and the three adaptations taken for the study. In summary, all three discourses clearly bear Valmiki's influence in terms of numerous ideas, subjects, literary devices, and expressions. However, because they are postcolonial interpretations, they adopt a feminist viewpoint. Unfortunately, they fail to do Ahalya, who is sinless but is wronged by her spouse and posterity, justice.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Finally, it can be claimed that while intertextuality has been extensively researched in the past, numerous crucial characteristics have not been acknowledged or investigated. For instance, it has not been clearly described how to study intertextuality as a cross-cultural phenomenon between contemporary Indian and English poetry. Future studies can focus on them.

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