



Transgressing Gender: A Cross-Cultural Study of Ahalya in *Ahalya's Awakening* and Galatea in *Galatea*

Mehulkumar Sagarbhai Desai
Research Scholar, Department
of English,
Gujarat Vidyapith, Ahmedabad.

Abstract: In this cross-cultural study the theme of transgressing gender roles through the characters of Ahalya in *Ahalya's Awakening* by Kavita Kané and Galatea in *Galatea* by Madeline Miller is explored. Despite belonging to different cultural and mythological traditions, both narratives examine how gender, identity, and agency are transformed through desire, divine intervention, and self-discovery. The analysis delves into the characters' journey from constrain to liberation, challenging conventional gender norms and underscoring the fluidity of gender and identity. By juxtaposing these stories, the study reveals the universality of the human experience of transcending prescribed roles and highlights the nuanced ways in which literature can address and reshape perceptions of gender.

Index Terms -Hindu Mythology, Greek Mythology, Comparative study, Ahalya, Galatea.

I.INTRODUCTION

Across cultures and epochs, mythology has served as a reservoir of narratives that reflect the complex interplay of human existence. Rooted in the traditions, beliefs, and values, of diverse civilisations, myths have explored universal themes, including those related to identity, agency, and the boundaries of gender. In vast tapestry of mythological stories, two distinctive and yet remarkably resonant narratives emerge- in the mythic realm of *Ahalya's Awakening*, Ahalya, once cursed into stone, resurfaces as an embodiment of agency and defiance. Her journey challenges societal expectations as she reclaims her identity, her choices echoing a defiance of imposed gender roles. Galatea introduces us to another realm, where Pygmalion's desire shapes a statue into the living being Galatea. Here, desire both divine and human, shapes and reshapes the gender identity of the protagonist. Her existence defies the conventional understanding of gender, a testament to the transformative power of human agency and longing.

Through these mythic narrations, we traverse the spectrum of gender, from constriction to liberation, and from external influences to self-discovery . These stories underscore the gender is not fixed, but rather, a fluid entity, subject to the forces of desire, agency, and divine intervention. This cross-cultural study navigates the mythic narratives of Ahalya and Galatea to illuminate the enduring and universal themes of transgression and transcendence of gender boundaries in myth and storytelling.

The story of Ahalya, derived from Hindu mythology, unfolds with the gravity of ancient curses and divine interventions. Ahalya, often cast in the shadows of her sage husband Gautama, becomes a compelling symbol of struggle against gender roles. Cursed and turned into stone for an act prescribed as transgressive, Ahalya's narrative commences with her transformation into an inert figure. Her tale is a testament to the endurance of desire, the reclamation of agency, and the challenge to societal constraints. In *Ahalya's Awakening*, Kavita Kané masterfully explores Ahalya's reawakening, wherein, she defies established gender norms and reclaims her identity. This Hindu myth invites us to

contemplate the fluidity of gender roles, the poetry of divine intervention, and the transformative power of individual desire in the ancient Indian context.

In the stark contrast, *Galatea* unfolds within the enchanting realm of Greek mythology. A story known for its embodiment of artistic yearning. Pygmalion's creation of Galatea transcends the traditional gender narrative in an altogether different way. Through the sculptor's ardor and desire, Galatea undergoes a profound metamorphosis- from a lifeless statue to a living, breathing woman. Madeline Miller's rendition of this tale focuses on the act of creation itself, wherein the boundaries between the artistic and the personal blur. Here, the story underscores the transformative power of desire and the agency inherent in the creative art. Galatea becomes an emblem of autonomy, challenging not only traditional gender constructs but also the dichotomy between creator and created.

The present study embarks on a cross-cultural exploration of these two captivating mythic narratives. While originating from distinct cultural traditions- one from the heartlands of Hindu mythology and the other from the annals of Greek myth- the story of Ahalya and Galatea share striking commonalities. Both narratives are marked by gender transformation, agency, and the liberating influence of desire and divine forces.

As the study delve into this comparative analysis, it unveils the intricate layers of these mythic stories. We will contemplate the ways in which Ahalya and Galatea challenge traditional gender norms and expectations, reclaiming their identities through agency and self-discovery. The study examines the role of divine intervention and male influence in shaping their destinies, and we will explore how desire, longing, and artistic creation serve as catalysts for profound transformation.

II. Ahalya's Awakening: A Reclamation of Agency

Ahalya, a prominent figure in Hindu mythology, begins her narrative within the confines of patriarchal norms. She is the wife of sage Gautama and finds herself ensnared in a tale of transgression and transformation. Her myth enters on a pivotal moment when she is seduced by Lord Indra, the king of the gods, who disguises himself as her husband. This act of deceit leads to her husband's curse, turning her into a stone statue- a punishment for her perceived infidelity. Ahalya's initial portrayal clings with the traditional role assigned to women in her society- chaste, submissive, and bound by marital fidelity. However, her awakening becomes emblematic of her defiance against these societal constraints. When Lord Rama, the hero of the epic *Ramayana*, touches her with his foot, she is liberated from her certified state. This transformative act not only restates her to life but also grants her agency to reclaim her identity and voice.

The narrative of *Ahalya's Awakening* serves as a profound commentary on gender roles that had been imposed upon her. She longs for freedom, autonomy, and self-expression, transcending the narrow confines of her prescribed role as a wife. Her awakening becomes a powerful symbol of rebellion against societal norms that sought to limit her agency solely based on her gender. Ahalya reclaims her identity and, in doing so, defies the conventions that initially led to her curse.

III. Galatea: The Transmutation of Desire and artistic Agency:

In the Greek myth of Galatea, we encounter a tale that bears striking thematic resemblance to Ahalya's story but from a distinctly different cultural perspective. Galatea, unlike Ahalya, begins her existence as an inanimate object- an intricately sculpted statue created by Pygmalion, a skilled sculptor from Cyprus. Pygmalion is dissatisfied with the women of his time, whom he perceives as flawed and unworthy. Thus, he channels his desires and artistic prowess into crafting a statue that surpasses any living woman in beauty and perfection.

This myth underscores the transformative power of desire and artistic agency. Galatea's transformation is two fold. First, she is an object of art, a representation of Pygmalion's artistic idealisation, emphasizing the malleability of gender constructs. Second, Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, responds to Pygmalion's impassioned prayer and, touched by his devotion, brings the statue to life. Galatea, once inert, now emerges as a living woman, freed from her existence as an art object.

The myth of Galatea challenges conventional gender roles and expectations. Galatea's transformation into a living being defies traditional notions of gender as fixed and predetermined. She exists both as an artistic creation and an independent individual, transcending the gender boundaries defined by her creator. Her awakening highlights the transformative power of love, desire, and agency in reshaping one's identity and existence.

IV. Common Themes and The Cross-Cultural Study: Transformation and Divine Intervention:

In *Ahalya's Awakening*, Kavita Kané focuses on Ahalya's transformation from a passive figure in the original myth to a character with agency and desires. Ahalya's awakening represents her desire for a fulfilling life beyond her husband's shadow and societal expectations.

Madeline Miller's *Galatea* also explores themes of transformation, but in this case, it's the sculptor Pygmalion who brings Galatea to life. However, once Galatea is brought to life, she navigates her existence with her newfound agency, emotions, and desires, challenging the traditional portrayal of the passive statue.

Artistic creation and Idealization:

Ahalya's story is Kane's novel touches upon the concept of artistic creation, but in a different sense. Ahalya is not a literal work of art, but her transformation reflects the idea of transformation through divine intervention and the power of beauty.

In Madeline Miller's version, the myth of Galatea is centred around artistic creation, with Pygmalion crafting her with the utmost precision and idealising her as the perfect woman. This focus on the artistry and idealisation is a central theme in the Greek myth. **Divine Intervention and Redemption:**

*"You, Ahalya, now a stone...never to be restored to your form
until He, son of Dasaratha, sets his foot on this Ashram."*

Ahalya's original myth involves her being cursed into a stone-like state as a punishment for infidelity but later redeemed by Lord Rama's touch. In Ahalya's Awakening, Kane delves into Ahalya's emotional and psychological journey during her transformation that allows her to experience life and love.

"'Galatea, wake!' Pygmalion said. His voice sounded hollow and strange. He tried to steady his shaking hand. He reached for her arm, then hesitated. His fingers brushed her warm, living flesh. 'It is true!' He thought. 'It's true!'"

In Galatea, the character Galatea is transformed into a living woman through divine intervention. Pygmalion, a skilled sculptor, creates a statue into a living woman through divine intervention. The goddess Aphrodite grants Pygmalion's wish and brings the statue to life.

Theme of Beauty and Desire:

In *Ahalya's Awakening*, Ahalya's beauty plays a central role, as it is a catalyst for the events in her life. Her beauty is seen as a source of both power and vulnerability.

The Greek myth of Galatea heavily emphasises the theme of idealised beauty and desire. Pygmalion's desire for the perfect woman is embodied in his creation of Galatea, and the myth explores the consequences of that desire.

Female Empowerment and Identity:

Kane's retelling allows Ahalya to reclaim her identity and assert herself, reflecting a more modern and feminist perspective. Ahalya's awakening is not just physical but also a journey of self-discovery and empowerment.

In Miller's version, Galatea gains her own sense of identity and agency after being brought to life, exploring her emotions, relationships, and sense of self as a newly created being.

The comparative analysis of Ahalya's and Galatea's narratives reveals compelling cross-cultural insights into the theme of transgressing gender and reclamation of agency. These mythic stories from different cultural background really illustrate the gender roles and identity are not rigid or predetermined but can be influenced, reshaped, and claimed by individual agency, desire, and external forces.

In *Ahalya's Awakening*, Ahalya's reawakening and resurgence from her stony imprisonment exemplify the potential for individuals to challenge and transcend societal norms, even in the face of oppressive gender roles. Her reclamation of agency serves as a symbol of defiance against the constraints placed on women in her society, whereas, in *Galatea*, the transformation of statue into a living woman underscores the transformation power of desire and fluidity of gender identity. Galatea's emergence from an object of art into an autonomous being challenges the traditional understanding of gender as a construct shaped solely by societal norms.

V. Conclusion:

Ultimately, the narratives of Ahalya and Galatea resonate with contemporary discussions surrounding gender identity and expression. They remind us that gender is not a fixed entity but a dynamic and evolving aspect of external forces. Both narratives celebrate the malleability and the potential for individuals to transgress, redefine, and reclaim agency within the ever-evolving spectrum of gender roles. They remind us that gender, like identity itself, is subject to change and transformation, and that individuals possess the agency to transcend established norms, offering timeless lessons about the fluidity and resilience of the human spirit.

VI. References:

- I. "Ahalya's Awakening by Kavita Kane – Book Discussion." Youtube, Merrative.
- II. Bamanie, Nuray. "Women in Ancient Greece."
- III. Bukholder, Rachel. "A Myth Retold: How Till We Have Faces confirms that a Myth is not a Fairytale". 10Aug.2012<.cgi?rticle=1183&content=mas ters>
- IV. Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Sunversion of Identity. Routledge, 1999.
- V. Doniger, Wendy. "Sita and Helen, Ahalya and Alcmena: A Comparative Study." Vol.37, no.1, 1997.
- VI. Dvir, T., Eden, D., & Banjo, M. L. (1995). Self-fulfilling prophecy and gender: Can women be Pygmalion and Galatea? Journal of Applied Psychology, 80(2), 253–270.
- VII. "In Ahalya's Awakening, Kavitha Kane questions the penalty for infidelity, and its significance in Indian mythology". Firstpost. 2019, <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.firstpost.com/living/in-ahalyas-awakening-kavitha-kane-questions-the-penalty-for-infidelity-and-its-significance-in-indian-mythology-7199101>.
- VIII. Kané, Kavita. *Ahalya's Awakening*. Rupa, 2022.
- IX. Mohanty, Ayuta. *Revisiting the New Woman in Indian Mythology*, IJSRST, Issue 2, Volume 4, 2018. X. Miller, Madeline. *Galatea*. Bloomsbury, 2022.
- XI. Nainar Sumathi, P. (2020). Issues of Women Identity in Bharathi Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters, JAC:Journal of Composition Theory, 13(8), 1-5.
- XII. Ray, Prathiba (2007). "Ahalya's Voyage: From Transgression to Transcendence". In Battacharya, Prathip. *Revisiting the Panchakanyas: Proceedings of the National Seminar, Kolkata, 2003*. Eastern Zonal Cultural Center in association with Book works. pp. 22-30.
- XIII. Sahasrabudhe, Aishwarya. "In Ahalyas Awakening, Kavita Kané Questions the Penalty for Infidelity, and its Significance in Indian Mythology." *Firstpost*, 30 Aug. 2019. Web. 04 May 2021.
- XIV. Walcot, P. (1984). Greek attitudes towards women: The mythological evidence. *Greece & Rome*, 31(1)

