

Reconstructing Identity in Myth: A Feminist Reading of *Ahalya's Awakening*

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Abstract

This paper examines Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* as a feminist reinterpretation of myth that reconfigures female identity through narrative reconstruction. In canonical versions of the Ramayana, Ahalya appears as a marginal and morally fixed figure, defined primarily through patriarchal judgement and silenced within the narrative structure. Contemporary retellings challenge this representation by foregrounding voice, consciousness and interiority. Using feminist theory and identity-based approaches, this study analyses how Kane reimagines Ahalya not merely as a victim of curse but as a self-aware subject shaped by social, emotional and cultural forces. The paper argues that Ahalya's transformation is not limited to redemption but represents a process of identity recovery mediated through memory, voice and ethical reflection. By examining myth as both a tool of regulation and a space of reinterpretation, the study demonstrates how modern mythological fiction destabilises fixed gender identities and enables alternative subjectivities. It concludes that feminist retellings reposition marginalised women from passive symbols to active agents within cultural narratives.

Keywords: Feminist Retelling; Mythological Fiction; Identity Reconstruction; Ahalya; Gender and Myth; Narrative Transformation; Marginalised Women.

Introduction

Mythological narratives have long functioned as foundational frameworks through which Indian civilisation has articulated its cultural values, social structures and collective identity. Far from being mere stories of the past, these narratives actively shape lived experiences by embedding ideals of duty, morality and social order within everyday life.

Through continuous transmission across generations—whether through oral traditions, literary texts or cultural practices—myth sustains a dynamic relationship between the past and the present, influencing how individuals understand themselves and their roles within society.

In this context, mythology operates not only as a narrative system but also as an ideological structure that regulates social expectations, particularly in relation to gender. Canonical epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have historically framed women within narrowly defined roles, often reducing them to symbolic figures whose identities are shaped by patriarchal moral codes. As a result, many female characters—especially those positioned at the margins—are remembered not for their subjectivity or complexity, but through fixed labels imposed upon them by dominant narrative voices.

However, contemporary mythological retellings have begun to disrupt these inherited frameworks by revisiting and reinterpreting silenced perspectives. Modern writers engage with myth not as a static inheritance but as a flexible narrative space open to reinterpretation. Through this process, marginalised characters are repositioned at the centre of the narrative, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of their emotional, intellectual and ethical dimensions. In doing so, these retellings challenge the authority of canonical representations and expose the socio-cultural power structures embedded within them.

Among such writers, Kavita Kane occupies a significant position in the field of mythological fiction, particularly for her sustained focus on marginalised female figures. Her works seek to recover voices that have been historically suppressed, transforming characters who were once peripheral into complex and self-aware protagonists. By foregrounding interiority and personal experience, her narratives question the moral finality imposed by traditional interpretations and instead open up spaces for alternative readings of identity and agency.

This paper examines *Ahalya's Awakening* as a representative example of such feminist reinterpretation, analysing how the text reconstructs Ahalya's identity through narrative, memory and consciousness. Moving beyond the conventional portrayal of Ahalya as a “cursed” figure, the study argues that her transformation in the retelling signifies a process of identity recovery rather than mere moral redemption. By situating this transformation within broader theoretical discussions on gender, identity and myth, the paper demonstrates how contemporary retellings reconfigure myth as a space for rethinking marginality, subjectivity and cultural meaning. Once, Kavita Kane said in an interview:

“Retelling of mythology is not new; it is dominant in regional literature. Besides, literature and mythology have always been interwoven, where mythology is used more as a literary

technique than just a retelling of old stories. It is more than that. It is revisiting, revising, and almost recreating.” (Kane, Interview)

Kavita Kane is one such writer of mythological fiction who focuses on minor women characters who were unknown or overlooked in history and traditional narratives. Her aim in retelling is to change the archetypes of these women and restore the forgotten ones. She is the author of several retellings such as *The Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen* (2013), *Sita’s Sister* (2014), *Menaka’s Choice* (2015), *Lanka’s Princess* (2016), *The Fisher Queen’s Dynasty* (2017), *Ahalya’s Awakening* (2019), *Saraswati’s Gift* (2021), *Tara’s Truce* (2023), and *Bhima’s Wife* (2025). In all these works, Kavita Kane chooses marginalised women characters as her protagonists.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship on Indian mythological retellings has increasingly foregrounded feminist reinterpretations that seek to recover and reposition marginalised female figures within canonical narratives. Rather than treating myth as a fixed cultural inheritance, contemporary critical discourse approaches it as a dynamic narrative field through which gender, power and identity are continuously negotiated. In this context, retellings are not merely acts of repetition but function as critical interventions that challenge patriarchal structures embedded within traditional texts.

A significant body of research has examined how modern mythological fiction reconfigures female characters by granting them voice, interiority and narrative agency. These studies emphasise that characters who were previously silenced or reduced to moral symbols are reimagined as thinking subjects capable of articulating desire, trauma and resistance. In particular, feminist readings highlight how such reinterpretations disrupt the binary moral frameworks of purity and transgression that have historically governed the representation of women in epics.

Scholars working on Kavita Kane’s fiction have similarly noted her consistent attempt to foreground the psychological and emotional complexity of mythological women. Her narratives are often situated within feminist and postcolonial frameworks, with particular attention to how narrative voice and interior monologue function as tools for reclaiming female subjectivity. By shifting the focus from external judgement to internal experience, Kane’s works enable a re-reading of myth that challenges dominant ideological constructions.

However, despite the growing body of scholarship on feminist retellings, much of the existing research remains confined to thematic explorations of agency, resistance and voice. While these categories are crucial, they often result in readings that treat empowerment as a static outcome rather than as a process. In the case of *Ahalya’s*

Awakening, for instance, critical attention has largely centred on moral rehabilitation or the reclamation of female desire within patriarchal constraints.

What remains underexplored, however, is the question of identity as a dynamic and evolving construct shaped through narrative, memory and social positioning. There is limited engagement with how identity is not simply restored but actively reconstructed through the retelling process. Moreover, the role of myth as a cultural system that simultaneously regulates and enables identity formation has not been sufficiently theorised within existing studies.

This gap becomes particularly significant when examining Ahalya's transformation, which cannot be adequately understood through the lens of agency alone. Instead, her journey invites a more nuanced analysis that considers identity as a temporal and psychological process, mediated through shifts in narrative perspective, ethical reflection and self-awareness. By addressing this gap, the present study seeks to move beyond conventional feminist readings and offer a more layered understanding of identity reconstruction within contemporary mythological retellings.

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Who is Ahalya

Indian mythology preserves both cultural memory and mythological belief through the figure of Ahalya, whose story has been narrated and reinterpreted by several poets and sages, including Valmiki and Kamban in their respective versions of the *Ramayana*. These varying narratives do not present a singular, unified account of her identity; rather, they offer multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations. In some versions, Ahalya is depicted as unknowingly deceived by Indra, while in others she is portrayed as consciously engaging with him. This multiplicity of representations reflects the fluid and contested nature of myth itself.

A. K. Ramanujan's *Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation* further highlights this plurality by presenting diverse narrative traditions surrounding Ahalya. In one such account, when Rama, Lakshmana and Sage Vishvamitra arrive at the hermitage of Sage Gautama near Mithila, Vishvamitra narrates the story of Ahalya's alienation and curse. However, even within these retellings, Ahalya's presence remains limited and largely mediated through male narrative authority.

In the traditional version translated by Ramanujan from Valmiki, Ahalya is represented primarily as a bodily presence, with little or no access to her interiority. Her motives, emotions and inner conflicts are not explored; instead, she is framed through the language of male desire:

Men pursuing their desire do not wait For the proper season,

O you who Have perfect body. Making love With you:

that's What I Want That Waist of Yours is Lovely (Ramanujan 26)

This passage foregrounds Indra's desire, reducing Ahalya to an object of physical attraction rather than acknowledging her subjectivity. The emphasis on her body reinforces a patriarchal gaze that defines her identity externally.

The narrative further intensifies this representation by attributing agency to Ahalya in a manner that is both limited and morally charged:

She knew it was Indra of Thousand Eyes In the guise of sage.

Yet she, Wrongheaded woman, made up her mind,

Excited, curious about the king Of the gods.

And then her inner being satisfied,

She said to the God, 'I'm satisfied, King Of the gods' (Ramanujan 26)

Here, Ahalya is labelled as a "wrongheaded woman," and her actions are interpreted through a framework of moral failure. Significantly, her perspective is never articulated; instead, it is constructed through the narrator's voice. She is denied psychological depth and reduced to a figure of desire and transgression. The narrative does not allow space for ambiguity, conflict or emotional complexity, thereby fixing her identity within a rigid moral structure.

Moreover, the episode involving Gautama's discovery of Ahalya and Indra further reveals the absence of dialogue and empathy within the traditional narrative. There is no attempt to understand Ahalya's experience, nor is her voice acknowledged before judgement is pronounced. Gautama's curse is immediate and absolute, transforming her into stone. This transformation operates not only as a supernatural punishment but also as a powerful metaphor for silencing. Ahalya is stripped of consciousness, voice and identity, becoming a static symbol rather than a living subject.

Thus, the traditional narrative constructs Ahalya as a figure defined by absence—absence of voice, agency and interiority. Her identity is fixed as "fallen" and "cursed," serving as a moral lesson rather than a representation of lived experience. The asymmetry between Indra's deception and Ahalya's punishment further reflects a patriarchal framework that regulates female sexuality while minimising male accountability. In this sense, Ahalya's story becomes less about her individual experience and more about reinforcing cultural norms.

In contrast, Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* reimagines Ahalya by providing her with a narrative beginning that precedes the moment of transgression. Unlike the traditional accounts that introduce her only in relation to her curse, Kane presents Ahalya first as a daughter—born to King Mudgal and Queen Nalayani, alongside her twin brother Divodas.

This recontextualisation is significant, as it restores her humanity and situates her within relationships of care and affection.

From the moment of her birth, Ahalya is portrayed as cherished and admired. Kane writes: “Nalayani picked up her daughter from the cradle. She gazed down at the small, fair, serene face. ‘She is simply... oh, so, so beautiful’ ” (Kane 7) This scene marks a crucial departure from traditional narratives, as Ahalya is no longer introduced as a moral symbol but as a loved child. Her identity is not defined by sin or punishment but by affection, beauty and belonging. By reconstructing her origin, Kane challenges the reductive portrayal of Ahalya and opens up space for a more complex and humanised understanding of her character.

3.2 Reconstructing Ahalya’s Identity in *Ahalya’s Awakening*

In Kavita Kane’s retelling, Ahalya’s identity is not fixed but gradually constructed through her experiences, emotions and social positioning. Unlike the classical epic, where Ahalya appears only at the moment of her curse, Kane foregrounds her childhood, inner life and psychological development. This shift allows Ahalya to emerge as a more human and complex character, shaped by loneliness, curiosity and self-reflection—dimensions absent in the traditional narrative.

As Sneha observes, “Kane elevates Ahalya from a character condemned for female infidelity to an extraordinary figure who transcends her curse on a journey towards self-discovery. Ahalya’s Awakening has successfully redefined the traditional image of Ahalya, shifting her from passive victim to an empowered individual” (Sneha 67). This reinterpretation moves beyond moral judgement and instead situates Ahalya within a process of identity formation.

Initially, Ahalya is introduced as the beloved daughter of King Mudgal and Queen Nalayani. However, her identity undergoes a significant shift after her marriage to Sage Gautama, marking a transition from royal daughter to ascetic wife. This moment becomes a turning point, as her socially assigned identity begins to conflict with her inner self.

Richard Jenkins notes, “Many of us, much of the time, are able to take identity for granted... There are occasions, however, when identity becomes an issue” (Jenkins 1). This perspective aligns with Social Identity Theory, which explains that identity remains stable within routine social roles but becomes visible when disrupted. In Ahalya’s case, such disruption occurs when her personal aspirations and intellectual curiosity are constrained by externally imposed roles.

Kane’s narrative traces this identity formation from Ahalya’s childhood itself. Her questioning nature—“Why is the earth called a mother and not a father?” (Kane 10)—reveals an early resistance to fixed gender norms. This moment reflects not only curiosity but also a

critical awareness of gendered assumptions. However, her intellectual abilities are overlooked within her family structure, where greater importance is placed on her beauty and her brother's freedom.

As M. Saranya observes, "Although her brother is free to go wild and follow his goals, she is counselled to settle down and find a wealthy husband. This conflict is central to many feminist narratives: the silencing of women's intellectual ambition in favour of self-sacrificial domesticity" (Saranya 80). This dynamic illustrates how patriarchal expectations prioritise appearance and domestic roles over intellectual development.

Judith Butler's observation further clarifies this condition: "It is, for Beauvoir, never possible finally to become a woman... Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler 44). This suggests that gender is not innate but constructed through repeated social practices. Ahalya's identity, therefore, is shaped not by her inherent qualities but by cultural expectations that define how a woman should behave.

Myth traditionally presents Ahalya as the most beautiful creation of Brahma, reinforcing the idea that her identity is rooted in physical beauty. However, contemporary reinterpretations challenge this notion. As Gnanam observes, "The mythopoeic imagination seen in the novels of Kavita Kane is distinctive in its feminist approach. In her novels, she makes the insignificant, derided and condemned women characters in the Indian epic narratives like Surpanakha, Menaka and Ahalya as her protagonists. These women characters in her novels are portrayed as victims of their circumstances. By making these women speak for themselves, Kavita Kane sheds a more positive light on them" (Gnanam 1-2).

Kane's narrative emphasises Ahalya's intelligence rather than her beauty, as seen in the line "Ahalya was far more intelligent than her brother" (Kane 11). Despite this, her intellectual abilities are ignored, creating a tension between her self-perception and societal categorisation. This conflict reflects Jenkins' idea that identity becomes problematic when self-definition clashes with external labelling.

Through this reconstruction, Kane presents Ahalya as a dynamic subject whose identity evolves through conflict, reflection and resistance. Rather than a passive figure defined by myth, she emerges as an individual negotiating the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures.

3.3 Voice and Agency: Ahalya as a Speaking Subject

In traditional narratives, Ahalya exists as a silent and objectified figure whose identity is shaped entirely through external judgement. In contrast, contemporary retellings, particularly Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening*, reposition her as a speaking subject who narrates her own experience. This shift from silence to articulation marks a crucial

transformation, as voice becomes a means of reclaiming identity from patriarchal interpretations. By questioning labels such as “fallen,” “impure,” and “wrong woman,” Ahalya exposes the limitations of moral frameworks imposed upon her and redefines herself through narration.

This transformation resonates with Hélène Cixous’s argument that women must reclaim speech through writing in order to resist patriarchal structures. As she states: “It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence... Her flesh speaks true... she signifies it with her body... she draws her story into history” (Cixous 881).

This theoretical insight is reflected in Kane’s narrative, where Ahalya’s voice articulates her emotions, desires and pain through interior narration. Unlike the traditional portrayal, her body is no longer a site of punishment but becomes a space of lived experience and self-awareness. Through this act of narration, Ahalya transforms from a passive object into a conscious subject who inscribes her own story into cultural memory.

Ragini Raghav further observes that Kane’s Ahalya is “stubborn, possessing a probing mind and capable of acknowledging her mistakes” (Kane, 42). This portrayal shifts emphasis from physical beauty to intellectual and emotional depth. Ahalya herself resists being reduced to appearance when she asserts: “Besides beauty of the body, there is in women beauty of the heart and beauty of the brain too... But how many see that? Most would not recognise or acknowledge the wisdom behind loveliness, the wit behind the appealing beauty of a woman” (Kane, 40). Such moments highlight her awareness of how society privileges external beauty while neglecting intellectual identity. Kane’s broader feminist intention is also evident in her own statement:

“If women have not been portrayed in a proper light, it’s because of misogyny and chauvinism which made us all myopic and did not allow us to see these women for their enormous strength and conviction. We need to return them into their original self by again using mythology as a tool to show what they originally were” (Kane, Interview).

This perspective underlines the ideological basis of her retelling, which seeks to restore emotional depth and complexity to marginalised women. However, despite Ahalya’s ability to articulate her suffering, her agency remains constrained within patriarchal structures. Her confrontation with Gautama reveals this limitation: “Your work! It means everything to you, doesn’t it? Why don’t you try to understand what I am telling you, why I am saying it? Why don’t you start treating me like a person? Why do you let your work dictate how much time we can spend together?” (Kane 270).

“I can tell you! All you think about is your work and how famous you will get when you become a maharishi” (Kane 270). These lines express her emotional neglect, frustration and longing for recognition. Yet, despite speaking openly, her situation remains unchanged. This reveals a critical tension within the narrative: while voice is reclaimed, agency is not fully realised. Ahalya’s experience demonstrates that within patriarchal systems, expression alone does not guarantee transformation. Her voice exists, but its impact is limited, exposing the persistent structures that continue to regulate female identity.

3.4 Myth as a Medium of Identity Reconstruction

Earlier discussions have shown how myth traditionally operates as a mechanism of social control by producing fixed and unquestioned identities. Through repetition and cultural authority, myth legitimises hierarchy and suppresses deviation, particularly in the context of gender. However, contemporary mytho-fiction does not reject myth; instead, it reclaims and reopens it as a space of reinterpretation. Retelling, therefore, becomes an act of revisiting existing narratives in order to uncover perspectives that were previously silenced. This process is not limited to literature but is also visible in popular culture. Recent adaptations of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, especially those circulated through contemporary media platforms, present characters with greater emotional depth and psychological complexity. These reinterpretations demonstrate how myth continues to evolve, allowing new meanings to emerge while retaining its cultural relevance.

Kavita Kane’s retellings function within this broader framework by revisiting marginalised perspectives and restoring narrative depth through interiority. Rather than accepting the moral finality of canonical narratives, her work repositions characters as individuals capable of reflection and self-definition. Figures such as Ahalya, who once existed only as moral symbols, are reimagined as conscious subjects whose identities evolve through experience. In this sense, identity shifts from a fixed essence to a process shaped by memory, emotion and self-awareness.

This transformation can be better understood through Stuart Hall’s concept of cultural identity, which is often perceived as a stable and collective “true self” rooted in shared history and continuity (Hall 223). Traditional myth reflects this idea by presenting identity as singular and unchanging. In Ahalya’s case, this results in her reduction to a single moral label, where individuality is erased beneath collective judgement.

Contemporary retellings challenge this notion by presenting identity as fluid and layered. Rather than being predetermined, identity emerges through ongoing negotiation between self-perception and social categorisation. Kane’s reinterpretation restores Ahalya’s multiple roles—as daughter, wife, learner and questioning subject—thereby disrupting the idea of a singular, fixed identity.

As Kumari and Ali observe, feminist revisionist myth-making destabilises dominant narratives by reclaiming marginal voices and reimagining power structures. Such reinterpretations not only challenge entrenched stereotypes but also create space for alternative understandings of gender and identity. Similarly, Bhagwat and Ghosh highlight how symbolic elements within myth, such as natural spaces, function as sites of transformation and self-discovery, demonstrating that myth remains adaptable across time. In traditional narratives, Ahalya's story is framed through action and consequence, emphasising moral judgement. In contrast, modern retellings shift focus toward emotion, interior conflict and subjective experience. Through this narrative transformation, Ahalya is humanised and repositioned as an individual rather than a symbol. Thus, myth is no longer a site of closure but becomes a dynamic space for reflection, reinterpretation and identity reconstruction.

3.5 Awakening as Identity Recovery

In *Ahalya's Awakening*, awakening signifies not merely release from punishment but the recovery of identity through consciousness and lived experience. During the period of the curse, Ahalya exists outside time—suspended, static and disconnected from memory, movement and growth. Her transformation into stone symbolises not only physical stillness but also the erasure of subjectivity. Awakening, therefore, marks her return to lived time, where reflection, change and self-understanding become possible.

Kane presents identity not as something instantly restored but as something reconstructed through memory and reinterpretation. Ahalya regains herself by re-entering time as a thinking subject who reflects on her past and redefines her experience. The curse, rather than remaining a moment of punishment, is reframed as a prolonged period of withdrawal that gradually becomes a space for self-awareness. This shift allows identity to move beyond victimhood toward conscious becoming.

When Ahalya reflects that a woman is permitted to exist only as a daughter, a wife, and a mother (Kane 340), the narrative exposes the restrictive framework imposed on female identity. Ahalya does not reject these roles but questions their limitation, recognising that identity cannot be reduced to socially assigned categories. Her awakening thus lies in understanding identity as shaped by experience, contradiction and awareness rather than by moral judgement alone.

While the traditional narrative emphasises external redemption through Rama's intervention, Kane extends its meaning by foregrounding internal transformation. Awakening becomes both an outward and inward process, where self-recognition accompanies release. In this reinterpretation, identity shifts from a fixed moral label to a reflective and evolving subjectivity.

3.6 From Moral Regulation to Modern Ethical Understanding

Traditional mythological narratives regulate women's behaviour through rigid moral frameworks that categorise actions in terms of purity and transgression. Within this structure, Ahalya's story functions as a moral lesson rather than an exploration of lived experience. Her actions are judged immediately, and punishment is imposed without dialogue or consideration of context. Moral regulation here operates through authority, demanding silence and unquestioned acceptance.

Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* reconfigures this framework by shifting from moral rigidity to ethical understanding. Instead of presenting morality as absolute, the retelling introduces a more nuanced perspective grounded in emotional experience, relational dynamics and social constraints. Ahalya's actions are not excused but are contextualised within her isolation, unmet emotional needs and the imbalance within her marriage.

This shift transforms regulation itself. Rather than functioning as punishment, it becomes a process of reflection and accountability. Ethical responsibility is no longer imposed solely on Ahalya but is distributed across relationships and circumstances. By allowing characters to question and reinterpret their experiences, Kane replaces moral finality with ethical negotiation.

In this sense, identity and morality are no longer fixed or divinely determined but are understood as evolving and context-sensitive. Myth, therefore, moves beyond being a site of moral closure and becomes a space for ethical re-evaluation. Through this transformation, ancient narratives are aligned with modern consciousness, where judgement gives way to understanding and identity emerges through reflection rather than prescription.

4. Research Gap

Existing scholarship on Indian mythological retellings has largely focused on themes such as feminism, marginalised women, narrative revision, and gender resistance in contemporary reinterpretations of epics. Studies on Kavita Kane's works often examine female agency, subaltern voices, and feminist rewriting, while research on *Ahalya's Awakening* has primarily concentrated on moral rehabilitation, female desire, and patriarchal judgement. While Tyagi and Anand (2024) analyse the recovery of marginalised women through Kane's adaptations, the present study extends this discussion by focusing specifically on awakening as a temporal and psychological process of identity recovery rather than mere narrative presence.

However, a significant gap remains in research that systematically examines myth as a medium for social identity construction and reconstruction, particularly through the combined lenses of identity theory, feminist theory, and postcolonial consciousness. While Ahalya has been analysed either as a victim or as an empowered woman, her transformation

has rarely been studied as a process of identity recovery, in which awakening functions not merely as redemption but as a return to consciousness, memory, and ethical self-definition.

Moreover, existing studies seldom engage with the temporal dimension of identity—how myth suspends, erases, and subsequently restores subjectivity through narrative time. The shift from moral regulation to ethical understanding, as represented in Kane’s retelling, also remains underexplored. In addition, comparative feminist strategies—such as awakening (Ahalya) versus withdrawal (Urmila)—have not been sufficiently examined within the framework of mythic identity reconstruction.

This study seeks to address these gaps by analysing *Ahalya’s Awakening* as a feminist mythological retelling that reconstructs social identity through voice, interiority, and ethical reflection. By positioning myth as both a tool of regulation and a medium of recovery, the paper offers a nuanced reading that contributes to ongoing discussions on gender, identity, and reinterpretation in Indian mythological fiction.

5. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative research methodology based on close textual analysis. Kavita Kane’s *Ahalya’s Awakening* is examined as the primary text to explore how myth functions as a medium for reconstructing female social identity. The analysis is theoretical in nature and does not involve empirical or statistical methods. The study employs a feminist theoretical approach, supported by concepts from identity theory and postcolonial feminist thought, to analyse themes such as voice, agency, desire, marginalisation, and ethical reflection. A comparative framework is used to examine the traditional portrayal of Ahalya in canonical versions of the *Ramayana* alongside Kane’s contemporary retelling, highlighting shifts in moral judgement, narrative voice, and gender representation. The methodology relies on close reading of selected passages, supported by secondary scholarly sources, including critical studies, theoretical texts, and author interviews, in order to situate the analysis within existing literary discourse.

6. Conclusion

Modern mythological retellings demonstrate that identity recovery does not follow a single, uniform trajectory. While Ahalya’s awakening in *Ahalya’s Awakening* signifies a return to consciousness after prolonged erasure, Urmila’s chosen withdrawal in *Sita’s Sister* represents an alternative feminist response—one grounded in refusal rather than visibility. Together, these narratives suggest that women’s identities in myth can be preserved and asserted through multiple strategies, whether through articulation or withdrawal. In doing so, they challenge patriarchal expectations that reduce womanhood to duty, endurance and silent sacrifice.

Ahalya’s awakening, therefore, cannot be understood merely as the resolution of punishment but as the beginning of self-definition. Her identity is not restored through external absolution alone but emerges through inward awareness, reflection and ethical self-recognition. By re-entering lived time and reinterpreting her own experience, Ahalya moves beyond the fixed moral label imposed by canonical narratives and reclaims her subjectivity.

Through such reinterpretations, myth is transformed from a site of moral closure into a dynamic space of identity reconstruction. Contemporary retellings thus enable marginalised women to be recognised not as passive symbols but as conscious, reflective subjects whose identities are shaped through experience, memory and self-awareness. In this way, myth continues to evolve as a living cultural form that accommodates new perspectives while reconfiguring inherited meanings.

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