



Watching Ahalya: A Foucauldian Reading Of Surveillance, Discipline, And Female Subjectivity In Kavita Kane's Ahalya's Awakening

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Abstract:

The paper seeks to carry out a Foucauldian study of Kavita Kane's Ahalya's Awakening. It examines the role of surveillance and disciplinary power in the formation of female subjectivity in the realm of mythological narratives. Through a Foucauldian study, based on the theoretical perspectives of the works of Michel Foucault on panopticism, disciplinary power, and internal surveillance, the paper seeks to understand the transformation of Ahalya from being an invisible female subject to a visible female subject. While Ahalya was depicted as a passive subject of disciplinary power in the realm of mythology, in the work of Kavita Kane, the female subject was depicted as more active, whose subjectivity was shaped by moral surveillance and patriarchal power. This paper argues that Ahalya's curse was used to restrict her physical movements and to make her a subject of surveillance. In this way, Gautama and society at large are portrayed as agents of surveillance. Importantly, this study also points out the concept of internalized surveillance, where Ahalya starts to monitor her own behaviour and becomes the very system of surveillance. However, the epiphany of Ahalya marks a significant turn in the system of surveillance. Ahalya's assertion of voice and self can be seen as a form of subversion against the very system of discipline and power. This paper, by using the Foucauldian discourse offers a new reading of the very important myth and also points out the relevance of the concept of surveillance even in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Ahalya's Awakening, Disciplinary Power, Female Subjectivity, Michel Foucault, Myth Retelling, Patriarchy, Surveillance.

Mythological stories have always been a source of influence on cultural values and practices, particularly with regard to gender roles and moral values. The character of Ahalya, in the context of Indian mythological history, has been depicted as a passive character who was subject to punishment for her transgressions against chastity values. However, the contemporary re-interpretations of the character aim to restore her voice and agency. Kavita Kane's Ahalya's Awakening is a narrative that re-creates the character of Ahalya not as a passive character but as an awakened character with a sense of awareness about the structures of power and desire. While the existing literature has been based on the theme of feminism and empowerment, the present paper uses the Foucauldian approach to understand the theme of surveillance and discipline in the narrative. Michel Foucault's theory provides a critical approach to understand the theme of discipline and surveillance from an internal perspective.

Under this framework, it can be understood that the life of Ahalya is under constant visibility and scrutiny, where patriarchal authority shapes her identity. The curse placed on her can also be understood as a form of extreme disciplinary action, where there is a control over her, both physically and symbolically. At the same time, her transformation also represents a move from being a passive object to an active subject. In this context, the research aims to understand the role of the retelling of mythical stories in understanding the role of power, surveillance, and resistance, along with other related issues.

The research aims to understand the role of the retelling of mythical stories in understanding the role of power, surveillance, and resistance, along with other related issues, through the theoretical framework of Foucault, where the role of power, surveillance, and the formation of subjects are analyzed. Foucault's theory of power can be understood as a form of control where individuals are not controlled through force but through subtle mechanisms, where the theory of 'disciplinary power' comes into play, where individuals are controlled through visibility, normalization, and correction, leading to the formation of 'docile bodies.'

The idea of 'panopticism' is another example that shows how the idea of constant visibility makes individuals internalize the surveillance. The idea that one is being observed makes them regulate their own behaviour, and as such, power is more effective and self-sustaining. Furthermore, the idea of 'subjectivity' according to Foucault shows that one's identity is made up of power relationships. One is made a subject both as someone being controlled and as someone controlling. This is important in the analysis of Ahalya's identity and how she resists patriarchal structures.

The subjectivity of Ahalya is first constituted within a framework of patriarchal surveillance, where Gautama represents disciplinary authority. The life inside the hermitage represents a framework of disciplinary power, where the ideals of chastity and submission are enforced. As Foucault argues, disciplinary power creates 'docile bodies' (Foucault 138). The subjectivity of Ahalya is constituted through a framework of continuous regulation rather than coercion. Sandra Bartky argues that disciplinary practices are also gendered, creating feminine docility (Bartky 65), which is exemplified in the life of Ahalya.

This surveillance takes an internal form as Ahalya begins to control her own thoughts and feelings. Foucault states, "Surveillance has its internal effect: to induce in the subjects over which it is exercised a state of normalizing judgment." This internalization of power is what Foucault believes gives surveillance its power (Foucault 201). Ahalya's guilt and self-doubt are a result of this internal surveillance. Judith Butler's theory of identity formation through repetition of norms helps to further illustrate Ahalya's identity formation through internal surveillance (Butler 45).

The encounter with Indra reveals the gender component of disciplinary power. Indra's transgression results in Ahalya's persecution. Ahalya's transmutation into a stone represents total control-immobility, silence, and objectification. Foucault states, "The purpose of punishment is to improve behaviour." Ahalya's curse represents such a form of control. Wendy Doniger states, "In many myths, female sexuality is punished, but male transgression is excused" (Foucault 182).

Ahalya's awakening may be seen as a form of resistance to these structures. Foucault states that "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 95). Ahalya's rejection of internalized norms may be seen as a means of re-establishing her subjectivity. Lois Tyson states that feminist re-reading "allows for the recovery of silenced voices" (Tyson 89), and this may be seen in the character of Ahalya in Kane's novel. Ahalya's awakening may be seen as a transition from object to subject.

One of the most significant ways in which Ahalya's Awakening constructs Ahalya's subjectivity is in relation to the politics of silence. It is evident that Ahalya is not silenced in a punitive manner, but rather silence is imposed upon her socially, even before she is cursed. This is an indication of what Michel Foucault refers to as the production of silence in relation to power, where silence is imposed upon certain groups of people in order to maintain power (Foucault 27). Ahalya's silence in relation to the traditional text is a politics of resistance in relation to the novel, where Ahalya's subjectivity is able to emerge in a new form of narration. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, among other theorists, argues that patriarchal discourse is one that silences women from speaking for themselves, and they are reduced to symbolic entities (Spivak 287). It is evident, therefore, that Ahalya's silence is a politics of silence, and it is imposed upon her socially, rather than Ahalya herself choosing to be silent.

Another notable aspect of this story is the control of the female body, particularly with regards to moral codes. Ahalya's beauty is depicted time and again, not as an attribute of hers, but as a burden to society, revealing the controlling nature of patriarchal appreciation of beauty. Foucault argues that in modern society, control is exercised over the human body, particularly in line with what is considered acceptable and desirable (Foucault 135). Ahalya's body is portrayed as one that is subject to control,

where she is not only worshiped for her beauty but also shunned for it. Other feminist scholars, such as Sandra Bartky, have also proposed that the female body is subject to constant control and surveillance, leading to self-control (Bartky 72). This is illustrated in the novel, where Ahalya comes to understand that she does not own her body but one that is subject to conform to societal expectations.

The novel also redefines punishment not in terms of divine retribution but as an ideology. The punishment meted out to Ahalya, turning her to stone, is not only a form of punishment but also symbolic. Punishment, according to Foucault, is not necessarily aimed at correcting individual behaviour, but rather at reinforcing social norms (Foucault 170). Ahalya's transformation into stone, therefore, symbolizes the elimination of female agency to maintain patriarchal dominance. Doniger's work on myth and its implications is also significant, as she argues that many mythological stories portray female transgression as a threat to be eliminated (Doniger 118). The novel, therefore, from Ahalya's point of view, not only challenges this trend but also exposes the political nature of her punishment.

Moreover, the story shows that awakening does not occur overnight but is a process. Ahalya's Awakening, for instance, is depicted as a process in which she becomes increasingly aware of the constructed nature of morality. Judith Butler writes that identity is constructed by repetition but can also be challenged by individuals when they become aware of the performative nature of repetition. Ahalya's Awakening, therefore, can also be seen as a point in her journey in which she becomes aware of the constructed nature of the morality that defines her as guilty. This awareness enables her to transition from being passive to being critical, transforming her from being defined by others to being self-defining.

Lastly, the novel's reinterpretation of the myth itself offers a clear example of the role of narrative as a form of resistance. Myths, as a form of narrative, typically support patriarchal hegemony, especially in the way female characters are portrayed as role models rather than as individuals with their own agency. Lois Tyson argues that feminist reinterpretations of a text aim to uncover the suppressed voices and the ideologies embedded in the text itself (94). The act of re-telling in Ahalya's Awakening is one of resistance, and Ahalya is able to exist as a real individual and not as a symbol of sin.

The research has demonstrated the impact of surveillance and power on subjectivity in Ahalya's Awakening. Ahalya's subjectivity has been demonstrated as being constructed by patriarchal control. Her curse has been seen as an extreme form of disciplinary power that has rendered her silent and immobile. However, the potential for resistance has also been demonstrated. Ahalya's awakening has been seen as a progression towards her being more aware and asserting herself in a way that challenges dominant definitions of her. She is seen as a self-defining individual through her voice. The novel has re-told the original myth in a way that demonstrates the power and gender control. This piece of work has highlighted the relevance of Foucault's ideas in relation to the importance of the dynamics of surveillance in literature and culture.

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