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Comparative Myth Retellings of Ahalya and Medusa: Rewriting Cursed Women

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Abstract: There has been an upsurge in interest in retelling mythological stories in writing in the last two decades. These retellings are distinctive in interpreting the marginalized characters by providing them with voices, while simultaneously questioning the sensibilities of their representation. Therefore, to explore how these curses are reimagined in Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* and Jessie Burton's *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth*, paying attention particularly to the transformational experience of both characters.

These modern retellings have reframed the curses, often portrayed as symbols of transgressions and enslavement, as a force of self-reliance. Using feminist and mythological criticism, the research will explore how these writings challenge patriarchal systems that silence women. Kane's *Ahalya* challenges the moral absoluteness of her punishment by representing tenacity and intellectual independence. In contrast, Burton's *Medusa* turns her monstrosity into empowerment. This study emphasizes the universal relevance of these themes, particularly for women who were silenced, offering tales and tenacity that remain relevant to contemporary feminism.

The idea is to read both figures as wronged women rather than moral transgressors. Indian and Greek mythologies are very ancient and share some startling similarities. The world created by myth and fantasy is built by using comparable techniques and modalities. Ahalya and Medusa are reimagined as individuals who grapple with trauma, navigate memory, and reclaim agency. The study states that modern feminist retellings serve as acts of narrative redress, upending established mythic traditions and redefining these characters as representations of resiliency, defiance, and recovered female subjectivity.

Keywords: *Feminist Myth Criticism, Body Politics, Re-vision, Retelling*

Introduction

Mythological narratives have served as a script through which societies articulate their gender hierarchies and moral codes. Medusa is considered to be one of the most enduring figures of Greek mythology. “I might go on forever, or at least that my myth will. I could break into a million pieces and stalk a million minds. I could drive women to feats of fame and liberty and wonder” (Burton 135).

As the story suggests, she was once a beautiful woman, cursed by Athena and turned into a gorgon, with hair of snakes. Medusa is a figure of paradox, ambiguity, and complexity. Her story contradicts and coincides. In various tellings of the myth, she is both beautiful and ugly. She destroys but also heals. She petrifies, and yet is associated with the fluidity of the sea. She inspires but also horrifies. Burton says:

> Medusa, I said to myself. Imagine the moment. No way. For what would he see—a girl or a monster? Or both at the same time? As if sensing my agitation, my head began to writhe. I reached up my hands and heard a gentle hiss. (Burton 15)

The name Medusa originated from a Greek word meaning ‘Guardian’—was one of the three Gorgon sisters, and after rejecting her childhood lover, she chose to be a priestess of Athena’s temple. One day, Poseidon, in a fit of rage, raped Medusa in the temple of Athena. Athena found Medusa guilty of seducing Poseidon, who then cursed her, transforming her into a monster by turning her hair into serpents. And yet she has been frozen in time as a face, a face that appalled others and has been rendered appalling by the Western imagination and culture. French feminist Helene Cixous, in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” writes of women: “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time” (880).

Similarly, Kane’s portrayal of Ahalya changes the divine logic of justice by explaining how patriarchy uses immobility as a weapon of punishment. Indra experiences shame regarding his treatment of another woman, Sachi, who is in love with him. Ahalya warns him about Sachi's devotion and impending marriage to another man, Vrut. Despite Ahalya's rejection of Indra's affections, he expresses his unwavering love for her. Tension escalates as Ahalya's barriers rise, revealing her own unhappiness. Indra's anger flares when confronted with her decisive refusal, leading him to declare that, “I shall win you, I shall woo you, Ahalya. You shall be mine!” (Kane 101). Ahalya’s existence as a stone becomes an analogy for limitations on female agency in a strict moral code.

The study talks about the misrepresentation of mythic women from centuries and how the retelling of the story has given a new voice and the old narrative a reparation. Ahalya and Medusa become subjects

who reclaim the narrative authority, questioning the canonical myth and encouraging a reconsideration of ways in which gender and power interact in mythological narrative.

Myth and Patriarchy in the Retellings

This work analyses Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* and Jessie Burton's *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* using an interdisciplinary feminist framework that incorporates feminist myth criticism, trauma theory, and body politics. Feminist myth criticism provides the central lens through which myth is conceived, not as a fixed cultural inheritance but as a patriarchal narrative structure. Drawing on scholars such as Adrienne Rich and Alicia Ostriker, this approach foregrounds myth retellings as acts of resistance that reclaim silenced female subjectivities and challenge canonical interpretations that reduce women to moral symbols.

Central to this framework is Adrienne Rich's concept of re-vision. In her groundbreaking work "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision," she takes Ibsen's play *When We Dead Awaken*, a play describing the use male artists and thinkers have made of women in the process of creating culture, and about a woman's slow, struggling awakening.

She describes re-vision "as an act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" as more than just a chapter on "cultural history" but an "act of survival." To know our real selves, we need to "understand the assumption in which we are drenched." She calls this process "self-knowledge" as not just "a search for identity," but "a refusal of self-destructiveness of male-dominated society." She motivates women to have control over their voices; she says, "feminists in its impulse would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, and how we have been led to imagine ourselves." She also points out that language has "trapped as well as liberated us" (Rich 18).

Burton's *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* resists silence through anger and self-articulation. Her narrative voice is sharp, confrontational, and accusatory. Burton allows Medusa to speak back to the gods, exposing their cruelty and hypocrisy. "And yet, I was monstrous. Was I monstrous? What was monstrous? Is what Athena did to me a punishment or a prize?" (Burton 45).

Whereas, silence rules Ahalya's life in *Ahalya's Awakening*. Silence is portrayed by Kane as both forced and reflective. "She would rather keep silent, stay invisible, away from the harsh hypocrisy, and remain a silent victim of societal convention. Would anyone hear her anguished wail, her cry for justice?" (Kane 248). Ahalya's protracted immobility turns into a place of introspection where she challenges patriarchal morality and divine justice. Her final "awakening" results in moral clarity rather than fury or rebellion. Instead of giving Ahalya overt resistance, Kane's feminist intervention focuses on reestablishing her interiority.

Myths tend to reinforce misogynistic ideas and devalue the voices of women by prioritizing male narratives in creating meaning. Phallogocentrism is a neologism coined by Jacques Derrida to refer to the privileging of the masculine (phallus) in the construction of meaning.

Alicia Suskin Ostriker, in her groundbreaking article "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking," says that this is a process of reclaiming, appropriating, and modifying myths, which enables alterations and different interpretations of the portrayal of female characters in a myth, "the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth" (74). She uses Helene Cixous' statement to support her argument, "if it were to come out in a new day that a logocentric project had always been, undeniably, to found (fund) the phallocentricism" (68). Then, all stories would be told differently and would have transformed the way we perceive myths.

Medusa's hideous body is excessive rather than passive. Burton reinterprets the monster as a fear-based patriarchal projection. Traditionally shown as deadly, Medusa's stare is reinterpreted as a protective reaction to infringement when she says, "Every time I went fishing, he was there. Every time. I was fourteen and I felt like ninety.' 'You should have stopped going fishing.' 'Why should I have stopped doing what I loved?" (Burton 80).

Ahalya's tale is reconfigured beyond the framework of curse and redemption in the epilogue of Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening*, where Sita visits Ahalya following her deliverance from petrification. This is a significant feminist reinterpretation, unlike the classical *Ramayana*, where Ahalya's liberation is contingent upon Rama's touch. Kane's retelling repositions Ahalya as a woman who has already redefined the terms of her existence before Sita arrives. Her identity is no longer anchored in her curse, her husband, or even her so-called "liberation," but in an inwardly negotiated freedom that refuses social recognition as its final goal, when Ahalya utters

> A woman has so many roles, but each has a perimeter. You have to step out and away and yet move forward,' she continued. 'But the world won't allow you that: it defines you as someone who has been born a daughter, to live as a wife and die as a mother. Who sees the woman behind that daughter, that wife, that mother? Women are not told that they also belong to a bigger world—of freedom, of knowledge … of passion, of ambition … (Kane 252).

Ahalya represents a counter-mythic position: a woman who no longer looks to the very mechanisms that punished her for validation, while Sita continues to negotiate her identity via public duty, insisting that "what they say matters" since she is a queen. This provides closure through moral rejection rather than reconciliation. Ahalya does not narrate her suffering as significant within the moral framework of the epic, nor does she want vindication. Disengagement—from judgment, from assigned roles, and from the desire to be understood—is what gives her freedom.

Judith Butler's theory of gender and bodily regulations sheds light on how power functions by inscribing norms into female bodies. She argues that bodies are regulated and disciplined through social constructs. She asks,

> Is there some commonality among "women" that preexists their oppression, or do "women" have a bond by virtue of their oppression alone? Is there a specificity to women's cultures that is independent of their subordination by hegemonic, masculinist cultures? (Butler 4)

According to Kane's account, Ahalya's metamorphosis into stone symbolizes the pinnacle of physical control—complete immobility. She is effectively cut off from the social and moral order since her body is rendered incapable of speech, movement, or desire. "She found herself frozen into stone, not in defence against the insinuations and barbs, but in the hopeful quest that she would seek her sense of peace" (Kane 246). Ahalya's petrification serves both literally and symbolically to entrap her in a state of immobility, a loss of voice, as she undergoes the metamorphosis into stone.

The patriarchal desire to completely eradicate female sexuality is reflected in this immobilization. Ahalya is punished for occupying a body that becomes the site of masculine desire and deceit rather than for a proven crime. By punishing women rather than holding males accountable, the curse thus transfers moral blame from Indra to Ahalya's body, exposing how patriarchal power functions.

Medusa occupies an uncomfortable place within the patriarchal order, because she is clearly female, desirous, and embodied but not modest or submissive enough to be comfortably readable. Butler contends that bodies only "matter" when they meet socially acceptable standards of comprehensibility. However, Medusa's form starts to represent excess of beauty, attention, and vulnerability, making her more vulnerable. Her transgression in Athena's temple leads to a punishing reconfiguration of her body rather than protection or justice.

Myth and Voices

Mythology has always been a man-made play. In both Greek and Indian mythology, women were viewed as supporting characters and typically had no major roles in legendary spaces. They have seldom had a voice of their own and have instead been viewed as an auxiliary or appendage. In her literary history, Medusa never speaks. We never hear Medusa's voice, not even in her backstory, which Ovid and the Greek tragedians develop. However, there are remnants, clues, and indications that she may have had a voice, possibly a very strong one, previously. Medusa's terrifying look, not her voice, is what makes her famous. However, Caravaggio's painting of Medusa's head moments after it was severed, with her eyes blazing with fear and confusion, her mouth opens as if to scream, and hot blood streaming from her exposed throat, paints a vivid picture of the violence of a voice cut off, a voice

denied. “Medusa's split is a split in cultural consciousness more so than physical body. She appears split and yet, deep within the psyche, she retains her wholeness—fluid and hard, alive and dead” (Diorio 72). The dichotomy of the punished woman who gains power because she is deemed unsuited for femininity is embodied by Medusa. Instead of resolving this contradiction, Burton's narrative emphasizes Medusa's tragic duality as both a menace and a victim, an object and an agent, a warning and the truth.

The difficult awareness of Ahalya's sexuality is explored in *Ahalya's Awakening*, with Lord Indra's unwavering admiration catalyzing her to acknowledge her uniqueness as a woman. Ahalya's initial anger is subdued by embarrassment after being cut off from her husband and kids. Ahalya's mental torment is exacerbated by Rishi Gautam's ignorance, which fuels her need for erotic fulfilment. Kavita Kane sensitively conveys Ahalya's internal battle between her wedding vows and her sexual frustration, culminating in an incident where Ahalya finds Indra dressed as Gautam.

> This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates outer, and so institutes the “integrity” of the subject (Butler 136).

Conclusion

This comparative analysis of *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* and *Ahalya's Awakening* shows how modern feminist myth retellings serve as critical interventions into established patriarchal narratives that control female bodies, sexuality, and moral agency. By reexamining Ahalya and Medusa, two historical figures associated with curse, transgression, and punishment, Kavita Kane and Jessie Burton not only bring back silenced women but also reveal the underlying ideologies that caused their suffering. By turning vulnerability into guilt, these retellings expose myth as a cultural tool that punishes women.

Adrienne Rich's concept of revision offers a basic framework for understanding these texts as acts of feminist survival. Reexamining inherited myths, according to Rich, is a political necessity rather than an academic pursuit for women seeking self-definition within traditions that have continuously excluded them. Kane's reworking of Ahalya, which transfers narrative power from divine judgment to female subjectivity, exemplifies this requirement. The notion that redemption comes from male absolution is called into question by Ahalya's refusal to reintegrate into society after her "liberation." Her preference for seclusion, meditation, and intellectual freedom subtly but drastically challenges the patriarchal expectation that women must fulfill relational roles like wife, mother, or penitent sinner.

In contrast, Burton's *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* presents a narrative that strongly resembles Judith Butler's theory of gender as a regulatory practice, emphasizing the violent creation of monster by corporeal inscription. Medusa's transformation serves as an example of how patriarchal power not only penalizes women but also renders them incomprehensible when they challenge conventional notions of femininity. Unlike Ahalya, whose resistance emerges through withdrawal and self-redefinition, Medusa's resistance is forced, embodied, and inevitable. Her body becomes the site of authority overreach, producing a figure so ostentatious that she subverts the very visibility, control, and surveillance mechanisms intended to keep her in check.

These retellings show how feminist myth-making is still useful as a critical method. By reinterpreting Ahalya and Medusa as women negotiating power, suffering, and selfhood rather than as symbols of moral failure, Kane and Burton reclaim myth as a site of resistance rather than control. Their narratives do not eradicate suffering, but they do explain it as historically produced and politically significant. By doing this, they encourage readers to confront the enduring cultural norms that still govern women's bodies as well as alternative mythologies in which women are not cursed for defying patriarchal authority.

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