



Research Paper

## Transgressing Gender: A Cross-Cultural Study of Helen and Ahalya

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### ABSTRACT

Myths are stories weaved out from the lives of men and women. Mythologies having been passed on through generations either orally or written form are revered for their morals and significant resemblances they have to the reality. Women have been ascribed with specifications regarding the characteristics of their genders from pre-historic period, and are often ascribed with the softer shades of life. Myths being the shadows of reality are an integral part of such a cultural identification wherein the stringent moral codes for women are featured. While observing the Indian mythology one may trace the reminiscence of such cultural symbolism pertaining to women. A wide spectrum of women characters like Mandira, Madhavi, Kaikeyi, Sita, Shurpanakha, Draupadi and Ahalya to name a few, who unveils the light in which women are represented in myths. Each and every characteristics pertaining to women have been prescribed and border lined by a patriarchal society that believed that dominating over female actions may prevent societal degradation. The portrayals and the consequences of these women transcend into the present reality. Ecriture feminine, particularly in negating the gender stereotypes that have been framed to induce a dominance over women's bodies by the patriarchal society. The paper also attempts to contributing its analysis in the area of reinterpretations and comparative mythology, by bringing in significant outlooks on how women were delineated and often depicted as morally degraded characters who brought in destruction and fragmentation to their domestic lives. When in reality similar acts by a male counterpart was justified and overlooked. Through a comparative criticism of the modern reinterpretations of the mythology of Ahalya and Helen the paper intends to highlight how these women have transgressed from their gender roles ascribed to them by their predecessors and underlines the significance of women's writing in modern literature.

**Key words:** Greek Mythology, Indian Mythology, Comparative Criticism, Helen, Ahalya, Gender

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Most historical fictions play a pivotal role in demythifying several year-old myths into something different through the reinterpretation of an author. Mythology is deeply rooted in human history; it is a product of language and of the human need to communicate and produce meaning. 'Myth' is one word that inherently accommodates two opposite meanings; it can either embody the highest esoteric truth or be a deliberate falsehood. It is an allegory, a pleonasm that involves reason and unreason, logic and fantasy, a compilation of contrasting images and motives. It is an idea deeply embedded within the psyches of people and retained throughout generations. Mythology is also considered a communal practice, holding the power to "bind a tribe or a nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities" (Guerin 149). It has become a form of fiction in which people put their hopes and fears rather than expressing reality.

The world of mythology was spectacular in its varied forms to an extent where on close dissection one may notice the similarities mythologies had from one another. Jung's concept of "collective unconsciousness" and the underlying assumption of an existing "proto-mythology" from which all the progenies took form. A beautiful woman, war, destruction, redemption or the spite between the good and evil was the recipe for most mythology. A modern reiteration of a myth uses the same archetypes to weave a tale but retells the story quite differently than the former ones. Transgressing over time the names Helen and Ahalya became analogous to the word 'illicit' and their roles were depicted in such a way that others were warned of misconduct set by

these illustrious women. The possibilities of Ahalya dissatisfied with her marital life and having a passionate affair with the God are not interpreted. Such interrogations into the composition of a myth finally consummates into reinterpretations.

Wendy Doniger's article 'Sita and Helen, Ahalya and Alcmena: A Comparative study' gives a distinct parallel picture of Ahalya with her Greek counterpart Alcmena, whereas Helen was compared to Sita from the Ramayana. Ahalya was the wife of Gautama. The legend narrates that Ahalya was seduced by Indra in the disguise of her husband Gautama. The infuriated sage cursed Lord Indra to have his testicles to be cut off and Ahalya to be turned into stone, until Lord Rama redeems her. This storyline holds significant resemblances to the myth pertaining to Alcmena, who was the wife of Amphitryon. She was seduced by Zeus in the disguise of her husband when Amphitryon had gone for an expedition. Amphitryon's inability to avenge against Zeus is due to his godly powers. The husband here resorts to resilience by realizing the impossibility of any revert actions and his helplessness in the state of godly affairs. This is quite contradictory to Indian mythology where mortals through their arduous penance may procure a position amongst the immortals. Gautama using his supreme powers that he had acquired during his penance curses Indra as well as his own mortal wife. Here what seems to be noteworthy is the way of redemption. Indra seeks the help of other gods to liberate himself from the curse and he succeeds in it. The entire *devaloka* comes forward to help Indra from his plight whereas the curse for Ahalya is shown as a necessity to redeem herself from the worldly desires to attain salvation, whereas for Indra it's merely a misfortune. There is no further emphasis on his redemption. In mythology gods like Indra retain his own political supremacy as the king of gods often resorted to chicanery. To serve his demeaning purposes court dancers like Ramba, Menaka were employed to distract the sages from their 'tapas'.

According to the Greek mythology Helen of Troy was born from a liaison between Lord Zeus with Leda in the form of a swan, Helen was extraordinarily beautiful from her birth. Shielded from the use of mirrors and from the eyes of Gods, her bewitching appearance bequeathed her childhood with a set of catastrophic prophecies. From both being the most beautiful woman in the world, to the mysteries pertaining to their birth, their choices that led them to being ostracized by the society. The major areas of research in comparative study was often based on the resemblances in the story sequence where wars were waged for women. This article however intends to examine how two distinct mythological characters from separate paradigms converge in terms of their treatment by the androcentric narratology. The trials and tribulations these two women had to face, the fixed nature of the gender roles ascribed to women. In Greek mythology fidelity was of paramount importance whereas infidelity was looked down upon as a sin. While men like Agamemnon who had a sexual encounter with Cassandra was kept in the background whereas Helen was pictured as the temptress. Wendy Doniger in his study mentions "Ahalya is, like Helen, the paradigmatic beauty and paradigmatic whore in Hindu civilization" (Doniger 47)

Simone De Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* that men oppress women when they seek to perpetuate the family and keep patrimony hindered. She offers a comparison of women's situation in ancient Greece with that of Rome. In Greece, with exceptions like Sparta where women lead their lives unrestrained, the Greek women were given the status of slaves who had no life or dreams on their own. In Rome women were discriminated on basis of their sex in the male dominated society making their rights chained. Beauvoir writes that a woman finds her dignity only in accepting her role ascribed by the patriarchs which is "bed service" and housework. A woman is torn away from her family and finds only disillusionment on the day after her wedding. Beauvoir points out various inequalities between the roles and responsibilities of a wife and husband is found when they pass their time in conjugal. She writes that marriage frustrates a woman's erotic desires and denies her freedom and individuality to their feelings. According to Beauvoir this is what drives women into adultery where they seek out their independent sensual pleasure which were not heeded by their husbands. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and subversion of Identity* contends that gender is an improvised performance which is acted out by people. These performances are in no way related to the person's identity which expresses the person's gender. Rather she believes these expressions are culturally influenced acts own shaped by what is expected from a gender in a society. If there exists no stable gender, she believes that there is no solid, universal gender that can be defined. These women characters from both mythologies where ascribed roles, particularly focusing on their gender for them to fulfill. When they failed to be chiseled according to the societal expectations of womanhood they were overshadowed with criticism and were set as bad examples for the humanity. Both women being exclusively criticized for their overt representation of sexuality without repression. Ahalya was depicted as a woman who had fallen to the mighty Indra who took advantage of her.

Helene Cixous in her essay '*The Laugh of Medusa*' alludes to *Écriture féminine*, she believes that women are meant to move out of the patriarchal system that bounds them and find a voice on their own. They have to reclaim their bodies which were dominated and visualized through the male perspective. *Écriture Feminine*, she believes would help women to establish and renew their identities through self-narratives.

Mythology doesn't significantly reduce itself to the period of antiquity. In fact, myth retains its immortality throughout generations due to its continuing relevance in each subsequent era. By comparing

different cultural mythologies, ontries to identify underlying similarities and reconstruct a "proto mythology" from which those mythologies developed

Margaret George has succeeded in bringing out the fictional biography of Helen of Troy, where she reinterprets the epic through a modern vision. This reinterpretation acquires considerable significance since it is through Helen herself that the readers get a glimpse of the Trojan War. Helen who was categorized as a seductress and an archetype of femme fatale in literature was given a voice to speak for herself. Margaret George is best known for her fictional biographies of epic characters, where she breathes in to life characters from a vast array of classical literature. Myth criticism endeavors to seek out the mysterious elements, those constituents of myths that made them perennial throughout history. It attempts to discover the archetypal patterns that composes the structure of a myth and equips it with an element of universality. Helen assumed the role of an archetype for beauty that culminates in destruction, she became the woman who was blamed for the destruction of the city of Troy.

A myth is a series of stories associated with the origin and beliefs of a community or a nation. It is an idea which is deeply embedded within the psyches of people who retains it throughout generations. According to Robert A. Johnson "Myths are a special kind of literature not written or created by a single individual, but produced by the imagination and experience of an entire age and culture and can be seen as the distillation of the dreams and experiences of a whole culture"(Johnson 5). In *Helen of Troy*, the author has assumed the narrative technique of a bildungsroman novel where George demarcates the life of Helen from youth till years of maturity giving us an insight on the episodes of the Trojan War through Helen's point of view. Through the protagonist being of a disreputable lot in history and who attained notoriety for her moral digression.

Helen's objection against her identity being solely confined to her physical appearance offers George's Helen as an archetype of women who often suffered subjugation under the male patriarchal order. The beauty adored by many and sought by all became the sole cause of her miserable fate. Helen ventures to an extent where she declares to her father Tyndareus that she may disqualify her men suitors who addresses her as the most beautiful woman in the world. For instance, on the fourth day of her suite for marriage to Idomeneus, king of Crete, he says that he does not trust rumors on what other men had witnessed. He had to see the beauty of Helen in person, and declares Helen the most beautiful women in the world. Meanwhile Helen cringes and pleads that she is not the most beautiful women in the world. She is tortured when her identity is dependent on her beauty and that men around her gazed her as a trophy to ornate themselves. Helen realized that though they were not in love, Menelaus looked past her beauty and was her first friend amongst her suitors. Whereas Menelaus being a cuckolded man had sought Helen as she was a symbol of his conquest. Their marital disharmony resulted in Helen finding love in Paris. In Margaret George's version of *Helen of Troy*, Menelaus during his final hours of death confirms that he sought her while she eloped only to serve his hurt ego. He admits to her that he did not seek her due to his love.

Helen was perhaps the foremost woman who sought her own destiny leaving behind the safe curbs of a placid domestic life that age offered her. Yet, her inability to merge in to the image of a "noble woman" made her an immoral seductress. Her beauty being equated with destruction. The gendering actions of her character are complex and difficult to pin down. On one hand, she is one of the most beautiful women in Greece, a prized wife from Aphrodite. On the other hand, she transgresses gender roles, having an active sexuality and a surprising lack of maternal responsibility. These facts, along with a comparison to other wives from the Trojan War, such as Andromache, make it clear that Helen's very womanliness is under scrutiny. Helen is portrayed as unwomanly because of her actions outside of the prescribed gender roles i.e, her lack of sexual loyalty within her marriage, her lack of association with motherhood. Helen's sex and sensuality differed from an ideal one to a mere seductress.

Indian mythology has its own share of a vivid history of vibrant characters who have set across the models of an idealistic life resounding faith and morality in its contexts. Pratibha Ray is a modern feminist writer who brilliantly articulates the oppression of women characters in mythology. She is an eminent Odia writer. Most of her works in English are translations. Feminist theory focuses on analyzing inequality. In the preface of *Mahamoha* Pratibha Ray says(5)

One should analyze both the psychological and sociological aspects of committing a sin. Many complicated, psychological, sociological and economic reasons are behind it. Years of suffering, deprivation, emotional trauma and conflicts drive a person towards sin...If she has a chance to tell her own story, what will she talk about? Will she talk about her happiness and sorrow, vice and virtue or suffrage and liberation? (Ray 5)

According to Laurie. L Patton in *The Fate of Female* contends and interrogates the representation of women during Vedic times. She quotes her statement using the mythical figuration of Lopamudra, who was the wife of the ascetic Agastya. She was envisioned by Agasyta in order to procreate a child who is capable to bequeath 'moksha' to his ancestors. Though there is a general assumption that women were active participants during Vedic times Laurie disapproves this by contesting their actual participatory nature in society which has always been subsidiary to men or to serve their purposes. It was as though women acquired no significance when she is stripped of being a child bearer in a society. Their existence and status solely relied on their

capability to bear an heir. In the case of Ahalya her life where Rishi Gautam had envisioned her as a tool to test his bondage from the worldly pleasures, Ahalya's impeccable beauty served him thus as a test for his celibacy. Ahalya on the other hand was a young and blooming woman with her youthful desires which were condemned and restrained by her ageing husband.

Madhumitha Bose in her article *Ahalya: A Self-assertive Woman in Ramayana* talks about the character Ahalya as a woman who successfully claimed the interests of her readers with her individuality and distinctiveness. According to the author Ahalya did what other women of her age only dreamed of accomplishing, that is submitting herself to her passions. She was perhaps the first woman rebelled against patriarchy. Ray's Ahalya exclaims "This society has put the woman on an altar after dressing up for sacrifice. . . A woman's tolerance, humility, and higher self- are appreciated by squeezing the life out of her by humiliating or exploiting her. The society transforms a woman into a goddess by mistreating her. Today I am also a goddess." (Ray 15)

The author contends that Ahalya was the first woman who was deviant from the cultural image that was construed for women of her times. According to the author minor characters like Ahalya are often overlooked due to the excessive glorification of Rama and his journey in Ramayana. She argues that Ahalya's story is important in the entire epic because it has always served as a foil to reveal the goodness and magnanimities of Rama. Ahalya thus became a lesson of moral infidelity to all. As per the patriarchal norms and conventions, Ahalya was an errant who was justifiably punished, and the story of her physical emancipation in the end also highlights the fact that a woman can achieve emancipation only through a male, and that to only when a man wants her to achieve it.

Indian Shastra was harsh with deviant women and prescribed ruthless punishments at the point of alienation and annihilation for anyone who transgressed it. Ahalya's innocence and docility were needed because patriarchy wanted Ahalya to be a subject for imparting patriarchal lessons of idealism, fidelity, infidelity and punishment. Lisa Gracia Tuttle formulates that the aim of feminist criticism lies:

(a) In unveiling and developing the female writing (b) to interpret the female symbolism and to retain them from being overlooked or ignored by the androcentric perspectives (c) reanalyzing and reinventing antique texts authored by women writers and developing and uncovering a female tradition (d) analyzing women writers and their writings from a female perspective, (5) to withstand sexism persisting within literature, and (6) increasing the awareness regarding sexual politics. Feminist revisionist mythology intends to revise and remodel the antique texts into new perspective thus creating a new text on its own. Feminine and masculine gender-norms, however, are problematic in that gendered behaviour conveniently fits with and reinforces women's subordination so that women are socialised into subordinate social roles: they learn to be passive, ignorant, docile, emotional helpmeets for men (Tuttle 184).

Myth in patriarchal language that is one that subjugates woman which analyzing and unveiling the gender disparities pertaining to women. A modern reinterpretation should endeavor a method of subversion in the female characterization wherein they can negate or rather demythify the misconceptions construed by the male authors and portrays the women characters through a realistic perspective. A comparative study of mythology offers an insight to how gender roles and stereotypes were formulated devoid of the culture. Simultaneously it shows how the roles and forms of gender disparities varies across cultures. Women characters in a mythological framework were chiseled according to the whims of men who perceived and framed them according to what seemed to be an ideal form of woman hood. Women like Penelope and Andromache were applauded merely due to their resilient nature and their lives being bounded by the domestic sphere of their household. They were least bothered about the political sphere or living their lives in their own terms. Freedom and desire were something which was to be bottled up.

Helen and Ahalya transgressed their gender roles in their pre historic re-presentations as well as modern interpretations. The implications of this article underline how myths are not mere stories, it echoes Jung's postulation that it is a collective unconsciousness. It underlines the necessity of women to write for themselves to voice the female mythical characters to reiterate what must have occurred through a feminist perspective. The regressive narrations which clearly modulate an ideal but subversive nature to women with respect to men are clear indications of a patriarchal views that pre-existed. *Écriture féminine*, where a woman should represent herself through literature as well as other art forms to decenter and deconstruct the archaic androcentric gender roles and idealism prescribed by men and ground these characters and their lives to their possible practical realities. Such reinterpretations may cater to a better understanding of the circumstances to the preceding generations equipping them with multiple perspectives.

Helen and Ahalya chose their passion and defied the ideals construed to their genders. There are indications to the grievances and subversions experienced by women even in epic narratives. They reveal their repressed sexuality and emotional turmoil. There was no clear confrontation of the male domination and oppression by the females. Mythical representations were in fact a part of education that were able to construe and shape the female consciousness in a way which were suitable to the existence and dominance of a world controlled by men.

The modern interpretations of epics differed since they poignantly depicted the characters as beings susceptible to their emotions and desires. Greek heroes are demarcated by the extent of valor that they may exhibit with a little stress on their ethics. Whereas the female counterpart is valued and treasured according to her beauty, which is through the form of sexuality. Female sexuality is also co-linked to male honor. The gender disparity becomes evident when men who utilize women for sexual favors are justified in their acts. Sexuality is predominant and represented as either women who willingly seduce men or are sent by rishis to seduce ordinary men to disempower them. This is also done by way of justifying the wrongdoer, as in the case of Indra, because motive is attached to his act as if the gods sent him to disrupt the tapas of the sage but not to Ahalya.

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