

Through the Ages: A Study of Ahalya and Lot's Wife

Dissertation submitted to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, in partial fulfillment for the award of B.A. degree in English Language and Literature.



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2024

## Certificate

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled **Through the Ages: A Study of Ahalya and Lot's Wife** is a bona fide record of sincere work done by, Ardra Anilkumar, Register Number: 210021000931, Bharata Mata College, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature under the Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam during the year 2023-2024.

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## Declaration

I, hereby declare that the presented dissertation **Through the Ages: A Study of Ahalya and Lot's WIFE** is based on the research that I did on under the supervision and guidance of Ms. Meriya George, Guest Faculty, Research Centre and Postgraduate Department of English, Bharata Mata College, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature from Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam. This is a report of my hands based on the research done on the selected topic and it is my original work and interpretations drawn therein are based on material collected by myself. It has not been previously formed basis for the award of any degree, diploma or fellowship or other similar title or recognition.

Date: 29/04/2024

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## Acknowledgement

I find myself fortunate to be surrounded by people who are forever willing to help and guide me. I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to Ms. Meriya George for guiding me in accomplishing my research work titled **Through the Ages: A Study of Ahalya and Lot's Wife**. Her supervision and support truly helped in the progress and timely accomplishment of this research work.

I express my sincere thanks to the Principal Prof (Dr) Johnson K.M, Dr.Thara Gangadharan, Head of the Department, and all other faculty members of my college for their support and concern.

I am also grateful to my beloved Mother and Father, family members and friends for their loving encouragement. Above all, I thank God Almighty for constantly supporting me and for blessing me with such wonderful people in my life.

Ardra Anilkumar

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This project follows MLA 8<sup>th</sup> edition

## Chapter 1

### From Cautionary Tales to Complex Characters

“Mythology have assigned women a gender identity which is rooted in binary logic and an issuance of a woman’s sexual identity in other words is anchored in the patriarch system.” (Nayak and Prajna 10). Throughout history, various segments of society have been subjected to discrimination and marginalization based on factors like gender, caste, colour, creed, and class. This marginalization has been evident in the portrayal of characters such as Karnan, Amba, Ekalavya, and Surpanka in religious and mythological works. Unfortunately, women have been among the most marginalized voices in these works, with their stories and perspectives being relegated to the margins for generations.

Marginalization has been present in our world for quite some time, and it takes on different forms depending on the society and cultural background. In Indian society, people are often marginalised based on their caste, while in Western society, it is often based on skin colour. Regardless of where we come from, women tend to be marginalized in every culture. Religious texts and mythologies are replete with examples of women who, despite their strength, endured suffering, and humiliation simply because of their gender. Ahalya and Lot's wife are just two such examples among many others, including Draupadi, Sita, Mandodari, Elizabeth, Hera, and Medusa. These women's stories serve as a reminder that even the strongest among us can be subject to societal expectations that demand acceptance of the injustices inflicted upon them.

Despite their achievements and accomplishments, women still experience marginalization and prejudice today, as backed by research. Sadly, this is an ongoing issue that persists due to deeply ingrained patriarchal ideologies that have existed throughout history. These ideologies perpetuate the belief that women are inferior and weak, and this has

been reinforced through ancient mythologies that continue to influence the mindset of generations, ultimately suppressing women in various ways.

This project is centred around bringing attention to the often-overlooked voices of women in religious and mythological works and to shed light on the issue of marginalization of women in these works to create awareness about the need for a more inclusive and equitable representation of women in these stories. The prime focus is on the plight of minor characters like Ahalya from *The Ramayana* and Lot's wife from *The Bible*, who have been denied the basic right to make choices. Unfortunately, these women are often depicted as disobedient and disloyal, with no consideration given to their thoughts or motivations. It is crucial to delve into the stories behind these women and the suffering they endured before addressing the primary issue of marginalization. By highlighting the experiences of these women, the project hopes to challenge the existing narratives and inspire a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of their lives.

For the part of Ahalya, the project will be focusing on the *Kamba Ramayana* or *Ramavataram*, which is a retelling of the early *Valmiki Ramayana*. This Tamil epic was written by the esteemed poet Kambar during the 12th century. According to this version of the *Ramayana*, Ahalya is the most beautiful female creature that Lord Brahma created, imbued with all his creativity. Sage Gautama was tasked with raising her, but when she reached adulthood, Lord Brahma requested that Gautama marry Ahalya due to his exceptional asceticism, despite his advanced age.

Indra had been admiring her from afar for quite some time and had difficulty accepting the decision. This frustration led him to devise a plan to be with her. During Gautama's absence from the hermitage, Indra disguised himself as the sage and approached her for intimate relations. Unfortunately, Gautama returned unexpectedly to find them in the

act, with Indra still disguised as him. He was angry and cursed both Ahalya and Indra, causing Ahalya to turn into a stone and Indra to be covered in female genitals. Ahalya begged her husband for forgiveness and a way to remove the curse. Although he could not lift the curse himself, he offered a solution: when Lord Sri Ram passed by their ashram, the dust from his feet would touch the stone and break the curse, allowing Ahalya to attain *moksha*. Indra, on the other hand, appeased Lord Shiva and his curse was lifted, resulting in his genitals transforming into a thousand eyes, and he became known as the god with a thousand eyes.

The part of Ahalya will be analysed through the re-reading of the works of Koral Dasgupta's novel *Ahalya* and Namita Rani Panda's poem "Ahalya the Winner," both the work focuses on the perspective of Ahalya. Rather than assuming the truth from the perspective of a male writer and the society that was made to believe that Ahalya was in the wrong, both works give us an alternate perspective.

Lot's wife is another character featured in this project, and despite being a biblical figure, her name remains unknown. She is often portrayed as a sinner for her disobedience towards God, serving as a bad example. The story narrates Lot as a just man who always put his faith in God and had no worldly attachments. He was the nephew of Abraham, the patriarch of the Old Testament, and they lived in the city of Sodom, infamous for its sinful practices, including homosexuality, which went against God's will. The story culminates with God's decision to destroy the land. He refrained from moving his loyal followers from that location, so he dispatched angels to the residence of Lot to request their relocation for their safety during the impending destruction of the city. As the catastrophe unfolded, the angels instructed Lot to flee the area and cautioned him against looking back while escaping. As they journeyed to a new destination, Lot's spouse gazed at the burning city, despite her



knowledge that doing so was in defiance of God's command. Instantly, she transformed into a pillar of salt.

The biblical tale of Lot's wife is a fascinating one, shrouded in mystery and intrigue. Despite her anonymity, she is widely known for her fateful actions, which have been deemed sinful. It remains a mystery as to why she chose to look back, even though she knew that doing so would incur God's wrath. This enigmatic aspect of her story has yet to be fully explored, leaving room for thought-provoking debates and discussions.

The project, then, revolves around analysing two poems that are centred on the character of Lot's wife. Both poems, written from the perspective of Lot's wife, delve into the reasons behind her decision to look back despite the consequences that await her. The first poem, titled "Lot's Wife", is written by Anna Akhmatova, a renowned poet from Russia. The second poem is also titled "Lot's Wife" and is written by Kristine Batey, a celebrated American poet. This project will closely examine the themes and literary devices used in these poems to gain a deeper understanding of their messages and significance.

This paper aims to conduct a comparative analysis of ancient mythological characters and their reimagined portrayals in the 21st century. Historically, these characters have been suppressed and depicted as negative examples, but with contemporary literary works, they have finally found their voice. Specifically, I will compare Ahalya from *Ramayana* and Lot's wife from the *Bible*. Using the subaltern theory, which explores the marginalization of individuals based on their caste, class, sex, and gender, the project will delve into how mythologies and theology have supported traditional gender norms. These norms often position women as secondary humans and reject their right to express themselves freely. Through re-readings of these characters, the world can gain a new perspective on

mythological and religious texts and how they have oppressed women and reinforced patriarchal norms.

The comparative study will be about the change in the representation of once-marginalized characters from ancient times to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Maybe the reason for the change can be considered as the emergence of women writers which helped to express the viewpoints of women.

The project titled *Through the Ages: A Study of Ahalya and Lot's Wife* comprises five chapters, each of which delves into different aspects of the topic. Chapter two presents the subaltern theory and will explain the emergence of the theory and how it can be used to analyse these characters. Chapters three and four explore the works that gave birth to these characters and their reinterpretations of them in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Finally, the last chapter concludes the research by summarizing the findings obtained throughout the project.

## Chapter 2

### Silenced Sisters: Exploring Women's Subalternity

The term 'subaltern' stands for the subordination of individuals based on their caste, class, gender, race language and culture from the hegemonic power. The word was originally coined by the renowned Italian historian, Antonio Gramsci, in his essay "Notes on Italian History" which was later included in his book *Prison Notebook*. It was used to describe the cultural hegemony that led to the exclusion of individuals and social classes based on their socioeconomic status. According to Gramsci:

The crisis creates situations which are dangerous in the short run, since the various strata of the population are not all capable of orienting themselves equally swiftly, or of reorganizing with the same rhythm. The traditional ruling class, which has numerous trained cadres, changes men and programmes and, with greater speed than is achieved by the subordinate classes, reabsorbs the control that was slipping from its grasp. Perhaps it may make sacrifices, and expose itself to an uncertain future by demagogic promises; but it retains power, reinforces it for the time being, and uses it to crush its adversary and disperse his leading cadres, who cannot be very numerous or highly trained. (Gramsci 451)

Gramsci believed that those from the bottommost rank of society should be the ones to chronicle its history, an idea that had its roots in Marxist historiography. While the term initially referred to the marginalization of people based on class, it is a part of post-colonial studies and was primarily used to refer to individuals in colonized countries. In this context, it refers to those who are politically, socially, and geographically excluded from the hierarchy of power within an imperial colony and the empire at large.

Ranajit Guha is a celebrated leader of the subaltern movement and is widely recognised for his pioneering efforts in reclaiming the history of marginalised communities. Through the essay “Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society” published by Oxford University Press in New Delhi, he introduced the term subaltern to Indian readers and aimed to give voice to those who had been silenced by the dominant narratives. Guha's extensive writings on peasant uprisings in India have earned him great acclaim and he is one of the foremost scholars in the field of subaltern studies. His concept of subaltern represents “the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the elite” (Guha 22)

To put it differently, the subaltern movement emerged from a growing dissatisfaction with traditional historical narratives. Its emphasis is on the history of marginalised communities based on gender and race. According to subaltern historians, it is the history of ordinary people, such as the lower class and women, who have been relegated to the role of mere spectators to the dominant class.

Arundhati Roy once said in her speech that was given in 2004 Sydney Peace Prize “There is no such thing as the voiceless. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard” (Roy). Individuals from marginalized communities are frequently silenced, yet they persist in sharing their perspectives and histories. Unfortunately, their efforts often go unnoticed and their voices are disregarded. In this context, our focus will be on the issue of marginalisation faced by women. As we have previously discussed, the term subaltern refers to the exclusion of individuals based on their caste, race, class, and gender. Unfortunately, many societies still uphold the belief that men are superior to all other genders and sexual identities, leading to the marginalization of women and their suppression for years. Our analysis will delve into how women are viewed as secondary humans and the extent to which their voices are silenced.

The phrase women as subalterns denotes the marginalization and underrepresentation of women in positions of influence and authority, which is primarily driven by their gender. This often leads to their views and experiences being disregarded and overlooked in patriarchal communities. The subaltern movement for women seeks to equip them with the ability to contest and challenge the pervasive male-centric narrative that surrounds women and to empower them to take control of their own lives and destinies.

The marginalisation of women is a grave issue that needs to be addressed urgently. It is not just a matter of financial status or lack of opportunities, but rather it is a systematic oppression that deprives women of their rights and dignity. Women are often viewed as less capable and are excluded from decision-making processes, which leads to their needs being overlooked. This is largely due to the deeply ingrained gender roles that are deeply rooted in our culture. The impact of marginalisation is far-reaching and affects many aspects of a woman's life, including healthcare, education, and job opportunities. In some communities, girl children are denied access to education because they are expected to look after the family and raise children. This not only limits their potential but also perpetuates the cycle of marginalisation. It is crucial to recognize and challenge these harmful stereotypes and practices and create a more inclusive society where every individual is treated with respect and dignity, regardless of their gender.

In the past, women were often overlooked in the subaltern movement as other issues took precedence. However, this changed with the emergence of Subaltern Studies VI and the contributions of Spivak. Spivak's work brought attention to the fact that women are also subalterns, and their experiences are just as important. Despite being subject to double marginalised by both patriarchal society and colonization, the struggles of women have often been left out of discussions surrounding the term subaltern.

Despite the advancements and modernization of the 21st century, it is still evident that women are often regarded as secondary citizens in society, and they face numerous challenges in navigating patriarchal norms. Although many women today are financially and emotionally independent, they are frequently judged based on their relationships with men and can be compelled to adjust their lives to suit male desires. This lack of financial autonomy, restricted say in family decisions, and even control over their earnings is just some of how women are still marginalized. It is disheartening to see that even in an era of progress and change, women continue to face structural, cultural, and social barriers that undermine their potential and limit their opportunities.

Throughout history, women have been treated as secondary in both mythology and theology. While there are certainly strong female characters in these stories, the problem lies in the fact that their sufferings are often portrayed as unreal and are glorified in a way that suggests real women should aspire to emulate them. Furthermore, these sufferings are typically caused by male figures, and the female characters who persevere through them are expected to forgive their oppressors. While there have been attempts to rewrite these stories from the perspective of women, many characters continue to be marginalized and their stories remain untold.

The theme of normalising women's struggles is not just confined to mythology but extends to other literary works as well. Numerous writers, including Sara Joseph, K.R. Meera, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Mary Shelley, and Margaret Atwood, have tackled this task. Their works offer a unique perspective on the female experience and contribute to a body of literature that reinterprets history from the point of view of women. By re-reading and retelling old mythical stories, the level of oppression faced by women is revealed, and the emotions of women while suffering are represented, instead of seeing it from a male point of view. These works shatter the typical thought that

women were not strong enough to rescue themselves or accept bad treatment because they were inferior. This reinterpretation of history can be considered a part of the subaltern movement for women.

The main goal of this project is to delve into the portrayal of minor characters, specifically Ahalya and Lot's wife, in ancient literature and analyse how they are depicted in modern works. These characters are considered subalterns as they were not allowed to express their viewpoints on their history. Their voices were silenced, and their stories remained unheard. In the past, many literary works have been dominated by male characters, leaving female characters in the background with little to no voice or agency. However, thanks to the efforts of scholars and writers, these once-silent characters have now been allowed to reclaim their voices. By examining classical texts through a feminist lens, these characters are now able to share their unique perspectives and challenge the patriarchal narratives that have long overshadowed them. This has led to a renewed interest in the stories and experiences of women throughout history and has helped to remove the taboos and stigmas that are often associated with them.

## Chapter 3

### The Stone Speaks: A Subaltern Retelling of Ahalya's story

Ahalya is a marginalised character, who has lesser importance in the original version of the *Ramayana*, written by the sage Valmiki. Her story is narrated in the “Balakandam” chapter of the *Ramayana*. According to legend, Ahalya was punished for committing adultery with the god Indra, who had disguised himself as her husband, the sage Gautam, while he was away from the hermitage. When Gautam discovered the truth, he transformed Ahalya into a stone, thus condemning her to a life of isolation and shame. This tragic tale serves as a cautionary tale of the dangers of infidelity and the consequences of betraying one's spouse.

Koral Das Gupta's *Ahalya* is the inaugural instalment of her The Sati Series, exploring the tales of the five *Pancha kanyas* of Hindu mythology: Ahalya, Kunti, Draupadi, Mandodari, and Arundhati. The novel is narrated in the first-person, tracing Ahalya's life from birth to her patient waiting for Lord Sree Ram to lift her curse. The story delves into Ahalya's fantasies and offers a unique take on the original *Valmiki Ramayana* tale.

The tale begins with Lord Brahma meticulously crafting the ultimate vessel for Ahalya's soul. When she inquires about her identity, he responds that she is "The face of my ambitions" (Dasgupta 3). Ahalya is more than just a mere mortal; she is a masterpiece that must be perfect in every way. Initially, she is depicted as pure as a newborn, eager to explore the world beyond the enchanted cavern Brahma constructed for her in paradise. As a soul, she ventures to the *Kalpavriksha* and encounters feelings that were not programmed into her by her maker, which is regarded as an irregularity. However, it is later unveiled that it was Indra, the deity, who implanted these emotions in her, and that she was living in a delusion crafted by Indra himself. Ahalya initially seeks a mother, but no one is willing to take on the role due



to fear of crossing paths with Brahma. Eventually, she gets the motherly love from the Mist who is also an illusion made by Indra.

In this captivating novel, the character of Ahalya is skilfully portrayed as delving deep into her fantasies which could be considered a dream for Ahalya from the original work. Her name, bestowed upon her by the lord Brahma himself, means "the unploughed, the unaffected, and the untouched,"(Dasgupta 22). Ahalya is depicted as the epitome of beauty, possessing long, silky hair, large eyes, long legs, and a slim waist. As the story unfolds it helps to discover that she also possesses a remarkable ability to heal, making her the most extraordinary creation of the Lord Brahma.

She was later sent to Earth to live as a human, with Gautam assigned as her caretaker. However, it was clear that this was against her will, and she lost all her memories of her time in heaven except for one: Mist, her motherly figure who stayed with her and protected her from everyone. Even as she reached puberty, Mist was the one who informed her about the female body. The only other character she felt understood her was the river Mandakini, perhaps because both Mist and Mandakini were portrayed as female characters. They encouraged her as she discovered herself and the needs of her body.

The novel depicts a woman who was remarkably active in her life, despite being ignored by Sage Gautam and his disciples. She made a conscious effort to assert herself, tending to the garden, cleaning the surroundings, scaling trees to gather fruit, and even offering it to Gautam. Her favourite activity was spending time by the river Mandakini. She is portrayed as a formidable woman who values herself and finds fulfilment in life's simple pleasures.

The union with the wise Goutam is not something that she desires or endorses. She was instructed to marry him and did so with a heavy heart as her romantic aspirations were

not aligned with the sage's lack of affection towards her. The wedding night is recounted in the tale, and it depicts the severity of his treatment of her, resulting in bruises. He was remorseful for his actions but struggled with fulfilling his duties as a householder. Despite her discontent with the marriage, she endeavoured to turn their humble dwelling into a welcoming abode and even assisted him in his endeavours to serve and heal humanity. Gradually, they grew closer and she imparted him with the knowledge of how to treat a woman's body with tenderness. It appeared that mutual feelings were beginning to develop between them.

Later in the novel, the wise sage becomes enraged with Ahalya after they share an intimate moment. The reason for this sudden anger is that the deity Indra has taken control of the sage's body. The sage believes that this happened because of Ahalya, as Lord Brahma had warned him that she had the power to invoke Indra. However, he foolishly disregarded this warning, assuming it would never come to pass. He blames Ahalya, accusing her of being in cahoots with his enemy. He laments that years of hard work have been destroyed because of her, saying "Falling into the conspiracy of the *indriyas* was a catastrophic blow...All because Ahalya, you made friends with him!" (Dasgupta 164). Meanwhile, Ahalya is left confused, not even knowing who Indra is.

Upon hearing everything, she is uncertain of how to respond. However, one thing that can be gathered is that she does not experience guilt for what transpired. There seem to be two potential explanations for this. Firstly, she may not have been aware of the identity of the individual with whom she engaged, as she firmly believed it was her spouse. Alternatively, she perceives Indra as a celestial lover who conceals himself but impacts her decisions, reactions, and yearnings. Despite being turned to stone after the curse, she harboured no regrets for what had transpired. However, her thoughts often wandered to the sage Gautam and the likelihood that he may never again place his trust in anyone. She could only imagine

the great efforts he would put forth to reclaim his status as a sage. Meanwhile, her love for Indra still burned bright within her, and she remained steadfastly loyal to her beloved.

The poem titled “Ahalya the Winner” authored by Namita Rani Panda, offers an alternative viewpoint of Ahalya's story. In this poem, Ahalya proclaims herself as the victor, while the sage Gautam is portrayed as the loser. The poem delves into themes of love and infidelity, as Ahalya questions the events that led up to her being turned into stone by the sage. She confronts Gautam about his love for her, which seems to have vanished, while he curses her for her actions. Overall, the poem presents a thought-provoking and nuanced portrayal of the mythological character of Ahalya.

The poem opens with the protagonist pondering whether her beauty was the cause of her being deceived and seduced. She laments being cursed for something beyond her control, resulting in her being transformed into a lifeless statue. However, her thoughts soon shift to the happy memories of her loving relationship with her husband, recalling the sweet words he used to speak to her. Amidst her confusion about her fate, she cannot help but laugh at herself and acknowledge her naivety.

Despite her name suggesting purity and once being seen as a symbol of chastity, she has now become associated with unfaithfulness. This prolonged state has made her resilient, and her physical appearance is no longer a concern. Despite being turned into stone, she still has a heart that yearns, loves, and laments over past events. She labels Gautam as stone-hearted, reminding him that he lost her heart forever and that he lost the battle he thought he had won by cursing her. She questions what he gains from losing his love and life and living as a dead person with a stone heart. In the end, she declares herself the winner and the sage Gautam the biggest loser.

According to the subaltern theory, which deals with the history written by the marginalised people, both these novels rewrite the history of Ahalya. She was once silenced and had to endure hate and questions regarding her chastity for many years. Both works present different perspectives of Ahalya. In the novel, Ahalya considers Indra her secret lover who influences her thoughts and choices and desires even though she has never known him as the god Indra. In the poem, she is a strong woman who dared to question her husband for cursing her for a mistake that was not intentional because she was unaware that the person, she was sharing an intimate moment with was not her spouse.

Even though it seems as if Ahalya in the novel obeys everything that is told to her there are times when she questions the patriarchal systems and the need for her to obey the things which are told to her. It can be identified that the Ahalya in the novel is not a traditional woman who hides her sexual desires and pleasures. She discovers herself and even tries to make their marriage work and have bodily affection towards each other. Most of these things are usually prohibited for women and when it comes to comparing the character with that of Ahalya in the *Ramayana* we can see a drastic change. The Ahalya in the *Ramayana* did not have a voice and even if she had she was shown as someone who took all the fault to herself.

In the novel, Lord Brahma describes his daughter as someone who cannot be controlled by destiny and who is free from the karma of her parents. However, towards the end of the story, she realizes that the curses that were aimed at Lord Brahma did not affect him because he is the great Lord Brahma. On the other hand, they fell upon her because she was his daughter. Even though she was not born out of the carnal desires of a man, she still had to face the consequences of her father's karma. Later in the novel, when she is in the hut of the sage Gautam, she feels trapped and imprisoned, rather than at home. This depicts that

she is not someone who silently or satisfactorily adjusts to everything, simply because she was born as a woman.

In the story, the protagonist feels a special connection to the river Mandakini and believes that it too has been deprived of human touch, just like her. Later on, after getting married to Gautam, she questions her decision, wondering if she only did it to please Brahma or if she was seeking a protector. Despite societal norms, she accompanies her husband to work. When Sage Goutam accuses Ahalya of having an intimate relationship with someone else, she defends herself by stating that desire is a natural human instinct that keeps the world going and that being affectionate is not a sin.

There are instances where she questions the patriarchy. For example, when she was cursed, she was in shock, but later she realized. “But then what was so shocking? Has not power always made its best attempts to uproot voices?” (Dasgupta 172). These lines represent the subaltern theory, which suggests that those in power often silence or suppress the voices of marginalized groups.

In the poem, the poet harshly criticizes her husband, who was a great sage, for not trusting her even though he knew that she was tricked and seduced. She calls him stone-hearted and reminds him of the mistake he made. She tells him that he lost the lover she was and criticizes him for ruining their love and life. She questions him about his gain from his actions. Finally, she declares herself as the winner of the battle that he thought he had won.

In the *Ramayana*, the character of Ahalya is often overlooked and marginalized when compared to other characters. The story of Ahalya, which has been rewritten from the original text, highlights this marginalization. Ahalya is not only a minor character with little importance, but she is also a woman who was suppressed and denied the right to explain what happened to her. Today, Ahalya is often judged harshly for her supposed adultery, but no one

has ever questioned whether she was tricked or coerced, or even if there was a valid reason behind her actions. She is considered a chaste maiden and a disloyal wife at the same time. In Hindu Tamil marriages, the bride touching the black grinding stone is a symbol of her promise not to be unfaithful like Ahalya which is the biggest sign that shows how marginalized she was, as the character Ahalya from The *Ramayana*.

## Chapter 4

### More Than Salt: Unveiling the Subaltern Voice of Lot's Wife

Throughout history, women who have dared to challenge societal norms have often been silenced. Lot's wife, an unnamed character in the Bible, is a prime example of this. Her story is recounted in Genesis 19. While her husband was a just man who always turned to God, Lot's wife was a caretaker of her home and had a different perspective. Lot's wife disobeyed God and looked back at the burning city, and as punishment, she was turned into a pillar of salt. Although she is a minor character in Bible and never mentioned again, her story has been discussed by the writers in the new era giving her the voice to speak.

The introductory chapter of the project explains the story of Lot and his wife. God had decided to destroy the city of Sodom where Lot and his family lived, as it was known for its sinful ways. God helped them escape the city but warned them not to look back. While fleeing to the mountains, Lot's wife disobeyed God's command and turned back to look at the city. As a result, she was turned into a pillar of salt. "But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt" (Genesis 19:26)

Even after many years, Lot's wife is still remembered as someone who disobeyed God. Unfortunately, no one bothered to consider her perspective and understand why she chose to look back. In this project, two poems with the title 'Lot's Wife' will be analysed to provide insight into her thoughts and actions. The first poem to be scrutinised is 'Lot's Wife' by Anna Akhmatova, a renowned Russian poet. The poem does not delve into the details of her life, but it acknowledges that she was not punished solely for disobeying God. Rather, she chose to be punished instead of silently accepting a life behind the place where she had lived all her life. The re-reading of the story of Lot's Wife helps in understanding her perspective better like most of the other retelling of the stories from mythology or theology.

The poem "Lot's Wife" by Anna Akhmatova was originally written in Russian. The project is analysing the translated version of the poem by Richard Wilbur. The poem depicts the pain of a wife leaving her city and people behind to escape death and improve her life. The first line of the poem, 'The just man followed then his angel guide' (Akhmatova 1), refers to Lot's journey away from Sodom while following the orders of the angels who came to rescue him. The poem continues as Lot follows the angels while her 'bosom cried' (3) out for a last glimpse of their city, implying that it is never too late to turn back."

In the following lines, it becomes clear that the woman's mind is urging her to look back at the place where she had once lived. She yearned to see the square where she used to sing, and the place where she had loved her husband and given birth to her two daughters. So, she turned back, but what she saw was bitter her city was burning. "Her eyes were welded shut by mortal pain" (10) This line can be interpreted as follows: the woman did not feel pain because she was turning into a salt pillar, but rather because she witnessed the destruction of her city. At that moment, she transformed into a pillar of salt with her foot rooted in the plain.

The final stanza of the poem poses a poignant rhetorical question, as the author wonders who would be willing to shed tears for her. She is described as one who has defied the gods, and is deemed as the "least of our losses" (14). This is because she is just one among countless other women who have been unfairly judged and ostracised due to their actions, which may have gone against societal norms or the will of those in power. However, the poet promises that this brave woman will not be forgotten, and will always remain in the heart of the poet. This is because she was willing to give up her life to catch a glimpse of the burning city where she was born, an act which was both audacious and inspiring.

The next piece of literature that the project is going to delve into is a thought-provoking poem titled "Lot's Wife" by Kristine Batey. This poem takes on a journey into the



life of Lot's wife, vividly portraying her daily struggles and her relationship with her neighbours. The poem starts with the poet referring to Lot as the 'conscience of a nation' (Batey 1), emphasizing his significant role in society. As the poem progresses, the poet paints a picture of the hardships faced by Lot's wife. While Lot turns towards heaven in prayer, she takes on the responsibility of raising their children in a city fraught with sin. The poet highlights the importance of motherhood and the lengths a mother would go to protect her children, even if it means disregarding the wrath of the gods. The poet eloquently expresses that regardless of the power of the divine, a mother must ensure the well-being and safety of her children. The poem beautifully captures the nuances of everyday life and her struggles.

The poem discusses the idea of neighbours. Others may think that their neighbours are bad people, but when they are in trouble and need help, their neighbours are there for them without questioning their religion or anything else. When Lot tells his wife about God's decision to destroy the land they live in, she does not argue or ask many questions but silently stops what she is doing and starts packing. While packing, she takes the time to say goodbye to the animals she has been rearing, patting their heads with tears in her eyes. She also bids farewell to the woman who held her hand in the child's bed, smiling, perhaps with a sense of guilt that she could not help them in any way. The poet also criticizes Lot by saying, "It is easy for eyes that have always turned to heaven not to look back" (31,32), while people who have been drawn to earth out of necessity cannot forget their daily life chores. The poet argues that being good to God and being good to humankind are entirely different things. Therefore, at the "breast of the hill" (37), Lot's wife chooses to look back as a farewell to her city and never regrets what she has done.

It appears clearer, the character who does not have the voice in the biblical story to express their emotion is given a voice to speak in both these works. When the angel asked them to run away from the land because God was going to destroy the land her husband did

not even bother to ask her opinion. It was her right to choose whether to run away or end her life with the city but he expected her to come with him and maybe think about the societal norms she went with them or to fulfil her duties as a woman supposed to do. But while running away she understood that it was not her choice and maybe she chose to look back and accept the punishment.

“The speaker of the poem identifies the “wild grief” that occupies Lot’s wife. The tone is like a gentle whispering using which the wife reasons with herself for taking a look upon her native city of Sodom.” (Jacob 2). Perhaps it was her intense grief that caused her to turn her head. From the perspective of the subaltern theory, it may be seen as a way of reclaiming her voice. In the original story, the image of God can be interpreted as a figure of authority who has the power to suppress the voices of the vulnerable. However, both poems suggest that her decision to look back was not a mistake, but a choice that could be viewed as an act of challenging the dominant power or those in a position of authority. This is precisely what the subaltern theory aims to address:

The wife in Batey is a courageous woman who voices out her concerns in a tone that resembles a protest against the authority of the divine commander. God and his/her authority is compared with the patronizing tendency of men to give instructions to their wives without consulting them. Women are not intended to think rationally for themselves, but blindly adhere to the ideologies of their husbands. (Jacob 2)

In Batey's poem "Lot's Wife," it is evident that the wife is a strong woman who does not care about God. She is solely concerned with her household responsibilities, and regardless of who the God may be, she intends to fulfil her duties. The poem portrays how this unnamed character, who is only known as the wife of Lot, goes against the person in power and shows her disinterest in supporting the rules made by the dominating authority. It

highlights how she is left to manage all the household chores and take care of the children all by herself, without any help. Perhaps that is precisely why she decided to reject any form of authority or power.

Lot's wife, the poem at the same time also gives her a voice to articulate her mind and her heart. Through her stories, she is no longer muted and silenced woman who is judged as a disobedient and materialistic woman in the biblical stories that deserves severe punishment and forever will only be remembered for her worldly desire and archetypal pillar of salt; instead, her side of the stories is highlighted and her being human is emphasized and not simply as just Lot's wife. (Mulyani 214)

In the Bible, the figure of Lot's wife is portrayed in a significantly different manner than in the two poems. The primary disparity lies in the fact that she is voiceless in the Bible. According to the biblical account, she merely glanced back towards the city and transformed into a pillar of salt. No explanation is provided for her actions. However, in the poetic works, the character of Lot's wife has been bestowed with a voice that was taken away from her a long time ago.

## Chapter 5

### The Weight of Myth and the Legacy of Female Transgression

In the initial chapter of the project, the focus was on the issue of marginalization that smaller characters, particularly women, face in mythologies and theologies, regardless of their cultural or national background. The discussion revolved around the characters of Ahalya and Lot's wife, who have remained silenced and unnoticed for many years. Through the retellings of their stories, these characters have been given a voice, resolving their identity as someone disloyal and disobedient. The retellings have provided a platform for these characters, allowing them to be heard and recognized.

In the analysis chapter, it becomes evident that retellings played a significant role in helping individuals to rediscover their voices, which were previously unheard. The study focused on two works for the part of Ahalya which were *Ahalya* by Koral Dasgupta and “Ahalya the Winner” by Namitha Rani Panda. For Lot's wife, the study analysed poems by Anna Akhmatova and Kristine Batey, both titled “Lot's Wife.” Overall, through this analysis, it is clear how retelling can be a powerful tool in empowering individuals and amplifying their voices.

The study highlights a crucial idea that the stories of minor characters in works like Ramayana and the Bible were not merely intended to impart moral teachings. Rather, it was a way to suppress the voices of these characters because, for the elite class, they were seen as insignificant. Unfortunately, these types of stories often blindly lead women to be subordinate and to accept the gender norms that are forced upon them by society. These characters serve as a powerful example of how voices can be suppressed by those who hold a position of power.

The retellings of these two women, Ahalya and Lot's Wife reveal their reluctance to carry out certain tasks imposed on them. In Koral Dasgupta's novel, "Ahalya," it becomes evident that Ahalya never desired to leave her celestial abode and live among humans. However, her father's will prevailed, and she was born as a human. Ahalya never wished to marry Gautam because she knew that he never loved her and her desires of life could not be fulfilled by marrying a sage. Nonetheless, she was compelled to marry him due to her father's insistence or out of fear of being alone. In short, both women had to endure situations that were against their will, but they had no other choice but to obey. In the story of Lot's Wife, it is evident that the traditional patriarchal belief was prevalent. The belief was that if a husband decides something, the wife must obey without questioning. Nobody asked for her opinion on leaving the city where she had spent her entire life. It is important to consider her feelings about abandoning her neighbours and friends to save her own life.

This study examines the evolving portrayal of these two characters over time. As indicated previously, there is a noticeable shift in how they are depicted as the year's progress. Initially, they conform to traditional gender roles by remaining meek and subservient to those in positions of power. However, in later retellings, their lives take centre stage and they boldly express their opinions, even challenging those in authority.

When comparing these characters, it can be noted that the common factor between them is that both of their voices were suppressed, and they were turned into a pillar of salt and stone, respectively. However, the most important factor is that no one even bothered to ask them why they did what they did. Instead, they were assumed to be wrong and portrayed as such in front of the whole world.

The concept of subaltern theory applies to these characters and works, as it allows them to reclaim their lost voices and challenges their marginalization. Typically, those who

are silenced are vulnerable individuals, such as those from lower classes, castes, different races, and women. Unfortunately, regardless of a woman's background, she will likely face marginalization. Minor characters in mythologies and theologies often go unnoticed, as they are often used solely for moral teachings. These stories may be accepted based on faith, and the characters themselves may be easily forgotten as they do not hold significance to the reader.

The primary objective of the project was to demonstrate how perspectives change as time passes. Many of the misunderstandings and taboos present in modern society are rooted in these mythologies and theologies. Rewriting these stories is crucial to help people comprehend that it was the era that deemed certain actions taboo and to recognize that each character may have a unique perspective. While most stories are typically read and accepted without question, retellings reveal that alternative perspectives exist, which may be far more insightful than previously believed. Retelling stories can help break stereotypes and improve the lives of modern women by making an inclusive society.

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