

Codes of Morality: Comparative Study of Ahalya and Madame Bovary

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Ancient myths acquire validation only when it is revisited and interpreted with alternative viewpoints, a quality that has been strongly embedded in our minds which often stimulates us to compare certain myths to the instances that occur in contemporary situations. However, Literature has a broad spectrum of perceptions concerned with different themes that the text encapsulates within itself. The theme of Transgression has always been the area of interest among many researchers to explore the psyche of women, assertion of women's rights over their bodies and the study of socio-cultural history of the society that existed before. This article attempts to bring in the inter textual elements that are evident in the myth of Ahalya, often regarded as a part of the great epic *Ramayana* composed by Valmiki, and the titular character of *Madame Bovary* authored by Gustave Flaubert in the year 1856. The comparative study of these two characters occur when they are analyzed as the subjects of double standard Morality created by the society and also as the women of Transgression, which signifies an act of committing adultery irrespective of their marriage. Though these two characters are taken from different historical and social paradigms, that is, Ahalya being a part of the mythic world, and Madame Bovary, rather a part of textual world, it is interesting to note that there are some facets that point out similarities between them. When Gustave Flaubert, the author of *Madame Bovary* began to write the novel in 1851, he took five long years to complete that novel and immediately on its appearance in the 'Revue De Paris' and later in the book form, 'Bovary' raised a tempestuous reaction. His vivid depiction of adultery was considered so offensive to morality that Flaubert was prosecuted.

In the case of the myth of Ahalya, texts like *Ramayana* composed by Valmiki in the estimated period of around 500B.C. and *Ramavataram* which was composed around twelfth century by Kamban under the patronage of Chola kings, are deemed to be authoritative texts in South India which narrate the same basic plot of Ahalya's story but differ in specific ways. But the plot as such is simple:

According to Kamban, the story goes back when Brahma created an absolute beauty called Ahalya, completely smitten with Ahalya, Indra felt he was the only god worthy of her, but Brahma ignored his arrogant boasting and placed Ahalya in the care of sage Gautama who returned her to Brahma when she was fully grown. Impressed by Gautama's purity, Brahma gave Ahalya to him in marriage and they were quite happy. Unfortunately, however, Indra had never gotten over his infatuation with Ahalya and often came to ashram to gaze her. Finally unable to resist any longer, he magically took the form of Gautama, while Gautama was away praying he tricked Ahalya into making love with him (Benton 78)

On suspecting Gautama's arrival, Ahalya

urges Indra to leave and begs him to protect her. Indra departs, but is fearful of Gautama, as Indra is leaving he encounters Gautama on the path and the sage seeing Indra in disguise as himself, curses him. After cursing Indra he then curses his wife as well. 'You shall dwell in this ashram without nothing to eat, air your only food, suffering, dying on ashes, and invisible to all creatures. (Bose 71)

Richman has this to say in this regard:

Valmiki's Ahalya eagerly welcomes the embraces of Indra, while Kamban's Ahalya believes that Indra is Gautama and finds out later that he is not. Kamban's version therefore portrays Ahalya not as an adulterous but as a wife longing for affection from her husband, whose celibacy and intense tapas preclude marital intimacy. (114)

Out of these two narrations, the most important question that has to be raised here is that, Brahma who created Ahalya never considered her opinion regarding her marriage with Gautama and well, the curse has it all. It was such that she has to dwell in the ashram without being visible to any creatures by consuming air as her food. By using his power Indra gets rid of his curse but Ahalya is to remain until Rama arrives to redeem her from curse. It is again Rama's gaze that saves Ahalya from sexual lapse, for after all, the very commitment of adultery is the one for which Sita is accused of and finally like Ahalya being punished. In these two versions, "Both Valmiki and Kamban narrate Ahalya's story primarily as Rama centered, taking her deliverance from the curse as a proof of Rama's compassion" (Richman 114)

According to other versions of Ramayana, specifically *Adhyathmaramayana*, Ahalya is being reduced to a mere stone without any life as a result of the curse and is being redeemed only by the touch of Rama. The stone can be symbolic of silence or immovability which is equivalent to death. While in the case of Madame Bovary, Flaubert portrays her as a woman lost in the world of Romanesque dreams pillared on the notions of Romantic literature she read and craves for the real life adventures outside the world of bourgeois boredom. She gets married to a physician named Charles, but is never content with her married life: "As their outward familiarity grew, she becomes inwardly detached and holds herself aloof from him. She imagined herself about the things that might have been- that different life, that unknown husband". (Flaubert 115)

Regarding Madame Bovary's transgression, it was the absurd dreams of passion, high romance and impossible love, which took her on the verge of committing adultery. By sheltering her dreams in the form of illegitimate relationship with other men, Madame Bovary tries to seek solace for her expectations, failing to which she commits suicide due to her financial debts and her broken dreams of love and passion. Madame Bovary's wish for a high romance and yearning for novelty are being narrated by Flaubert in the way she spends her life in the convent with dreadful conformity and the eternal uniforms. The discipline, most of all it is perhaps, this discipline itself and also Madame Bovary's dreams which taught her to stay in herself chasing her own life. Madame Bovary driven by the romantic desires wept at the cost of her own grief. Flaubert mentions Madame Bovary's desire for having a male child that afforded her a kind of anticipatory revenge for all her past helplessness of being a woman. Madame Bovary's frame of mind is reflected in these lines.

"Man at any rate is free. He can explore the passions and the continents, can surmount obstacles, reach out to most distant joys. Whereas a woman is constantly thwarted, at once inert and pliant, she has to contend with both physical weakness and legal subordination. Her will is like a veil on her bonnet, fastened by a single string and

quivering at every breeze that blows. Always there is a desire that impels and the convention that restrains". (Flaubert 93)

Both these women are exploited in the hands of men at their own ends. As in the case of Ahalya, Indra fails to protect Ahalya and tries to escape from the place and so gets rid of the curse, similarly when Madame Bovary who has been waiting to elope with Radolphe a man with whom she has an illegitimate relationship, to start a new life, he escapes from the crisis by cheating her without his arrival and by giving justification in the form of letter bidding a good bye. The societal moral codes and its interference with the natural self-expression and spontaneity of women results in the resentment and discontent of these characters. It is therefore interesting to note the power dynamics that is in the work of these two characters or rather the victims of societal conventions. Even in the case of Madame Bovary though suicide is a self-involved act, the reason for her death stems out from a man. The description of Madame Bovary's death in the novel is similar to the immovable curse of Ahalya. These lines in the novel suggest the immovability of Madame Bovary on a death bed in a different way

The priest dipped his right thumb in the oil and began the unctions; first on the eyes, that had so coveted all earthly splendors: then on the nostrils that had loved warm breezes and amorous perfumes; then on mouth, that had opened for falsehood; had groaned with pride and cried out in lust ; then on hands, that had reveled in delicious contacts; lastly on the soles of the feet, that had once run so swiftly to the assuaging of her desires, and now would walk no more (345)

Both Ahalya and Madame Bovary, thus, conceptualize their husbands as their own dreams of adoration hoping for a new life, failing to which they fall into the act of transgressions, the only difference is in the narrations concerning the myth of Ahalya, that do not articulate her opinions and desires, Whereas Madame Bovary's voice wanders throughout the novel but is never addressed appropriately. Both Madame Bovary and Ahalya are caught in the realms of the distinctions of moral codes, that is, the constructions which favored only men and failed in the inclusion of these women by marginalizing their opinions.

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