
Patriarchy and Politics of Identity in Koral Dasgupta's *Ahalya*

Dr. Ankita

Associate Professor in English,
Government College Sampla (Rohtak), Haryana.
ankitabeniwal@gmail.com

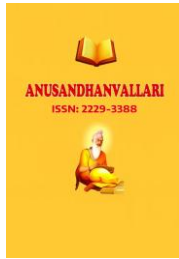
Abstract: This paper examines the interplay of patriarchy and the politics of identity in Koral Dasgupta's novella *Ahalya*. Through the lens of feminist literary criticism, the study investigates how Dasgupta portrays the struggles of women in a patriarchal society, focusing on the titular character, Ahalya. The narrative explores themes of agency, subjugation, and self-identity against the backdrop of traditional gender roles and societal expectations. By analyzing the characters, symbolism, and narrative structure, this paper highlights how Dasgupta critiques the oppressive nature of patriarchy while advocating for women's empowerment and self-definition.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Identity Politics, Feminism, Gender Roles, Agency, Subjugation.

Introduction

Koral Dasgupta's *Ahalya* reinterprets the ancient myth of Ahalya, a character from Hindu mythology who is often depicted as a victim of her circumstances. In Dasgupta's novella, Ahalya is not merely a passive figure but a complex character grappling with her identity within a patriarchal society. This paper aims to explore how Dasgupta engages with themes of patriarchy and identity politics, shedding light on the ways in which societal norms shape women's experiences. The original Ahalya story appears in ancient texts such as the Ramayana, where Ahalya is turned to stone by her husband, Gautama Rishi, after being seduced by Lord Indra. Ahalya was later restored to life by Lord Rama and is considered as one of the *Panch Kanya*. The myth traditionally portrays Ahalya as a figure of sin and shame, often reducing her to a victim of male desires and divine whims. Dasgupta's narrative challenges these interpretations, providing a fresh perspective that emphasises Ahalya's complexity and agency. Through a feminist lens, this analysis delves into Ahalya's struggle for agency, self-identity, and the larger implications of her story within contemporary discussions on gender and identity. By critically engaging with Dasgupta's text, this paper seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on feminism and identity politics. Patriarchy, defined as a social system where men predominantly hold power and authority, profoundly influences women's identities and experiences. In Koral Dasgupta's *Ahalya*, this impact is illustrated through the experiences of the titular character, who navigates a world rife with patriarchal constraints. This section examines how patriarchy shapes Ahalya's identity, the societal expectations imposed upon her, and the ways in which she resists these limitations.

Patriarchy manifests in various forms across cultures, influencing social norms, family dynamics, and individual identities. In Dasgupta's *Ahalya*, male authority figures dominate, perpetuating the belief that women should conform to traditional gender roles. Ahalya's experiences reflect the broader societal narrative that defines women primarily in relation to men—either as dutiful wives, mothers, or objects of desire. Dasgupta illustrates this through Ahalya's interactions with male characters, where their perceptions of her value often overshadow her individuality. For instance, when Ahalya reflects on her role as a wife, she grapples with the expectations that confine her to a passive existence. She states, "I am expected to be the silent partner in my own life, my worth tied to my ability to please others" (Dasgupta 42). This quote encapsulates the restrictive nature of patriarchy, which limits women's agency and self-expression.



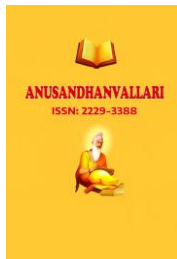
In a patriarchal society, women's voices are often marginalised, leading to a profound sense of isolation and helplessness. However, Ahalya's journey in Dasgupta's novella emphasises the power of reclaiming one's voice as an act of rebellion against patriarchal oppression. The act of speaking out becomes a means of asserting her identity and challenging the norms that seek to silence her. Dasgupta writes, "In a world where the silence of women is the norm, Ahalya's voice becomes an act of rebellion" (Dasgupta ,34). This assertion highlights the significance of self-expression as a pathway to empowerment. By choosing to articulate her desires and frustrations, Ahalya not only resists the patriarchal order but also begins to redefine her identity outside its constraints. The tension between societal expectations and personal desires is a central theme in Ahalya. As Ahalya navigates her identity within a patriarchal framework, she faces the challenge of reconciling her own aspirations with the roles that society has assigned to her. Dasgupta effectively captures this struggle, portraying Ahalya as a character caught between conformity and rebellion. Ahalya's internal conflict is exemplified in her moments of self-reflection, where she questions the validity of the identity imposed upon her. She muses, "Who am I, beyond the labels of wife and mother? Am I not deserving of a narrative that belongs to me alone?" (Dasgupta ,59). This introspection reveals Ahalya's desire for self-definition, emphasising the need to break free from the societal shackles that restrict her identity.

The societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles can create a dissonance between an individual's true self and the identity they are expected to embody. In Ahalya, Dasgupta explores how this pressure affects women's mental health and sense of self-worth. Ahalya's experiences illustrate the damaging effects of adhering to a patriarchal narrative that devalues women's autonomy. For instance, when Ahalya experiences moments of doubt about her worth, she reflects, "Every time I am told to smile, to behave, to comply, I feel a piece of myself fade away" (Dasgupta,87). This poignant quote underscores the emotional toll of patriarchal expectations, revealing how they can erode a woman's sense of identity and self-worth over time. Despite the challenges posed by patriarchy, Dasgupta ultimately portrays Ahalya's journey as one of self-actualisation and empowerment. As Ahalya begins to recognise the limitations imposed upon her, she also discovers the strength to challenge these constraints. This transformation is emblematic of a broader feminist discourse that advocates for women's rights to define their identities autonomously. The process of self-actualization is depicted in Ahalya's journey towards reclaiming her voice and identity. Dasgupta writes, "To defy the labels that bind her is to reclaim her existence" (Dasgupta ,102). This statement emphasises the significance of defiance as a means of asserting one's identity and challenging the patriarchal narrative that seeks to confine women to predefined roles.

The Politics of Identity in Ahalya

In *Ahalya*, Dasgupta intricately weaves the theme of identity politics into the narrative, highlighting the complexities of self-definition in a patriarchal society. The novella presents identity not as a fixed concept but as a fluid and dynamic construct influenced by various internal and external factors. This section will examine how Dasgupta portrays Ahalya's identity as she navigates societal expectations, personal desires, and the journey toward self-actualisation. Identity is often perceived as a static label; however, Dasgupta challenges this notion by presenting Ahalya's identity as fluid and multifaceted. Throughout the novella, Ahalya's experiences illustrate that identity can evolve, shaped by personal choices and the socio-cultural environment.

Dasgupta writes, "In the ebb and flow of life, identity is not a destination but a journey, ever-changing and evolving" (Dasgupta 101). This quote emphasises the idea that identity is shaped by experiences and contexts rather than confined to predetermined roles. Ahalya's character embodies this fluidity, as she learns to navigate the complexities of her existence while resisting the limitations imposed by society. Societal expectations play a significant role in shaping Ahalya's identity. Dasgupta illustrates how cultural norms and gender roles impose rigid definitions of womanhood, influencing how Ahalya perceives herself. The pressure to conform to traditional expectations often leads to internal conflict as she grapples with her desires versus societal dictates. Ahalya



reflects, “Every time I conform to their expectations, I feel a piece of myself being lost in the shadows” (Dasgupta ,78). This statement encapsulates the struggle many women face in a patriarchal society, where conforming to societal norms can lead to the erasure of personal identity. Ahalya’s journey becomes one of self-discovery, where she strives to reclaim her identity from the constraints of societal expectations.

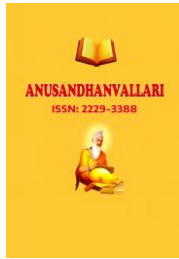
Dasgupta employs rich symbolism throughout *Ahalya* to convey the complexities of identity politics. The titular character’s transformation serves as a metaphor for the broader struggles women face in asserting their identities. For example, the act of being turned to stone symbolises the silencing and subjugation of women in patriarchal structures. Ahalya’s eventual reclaiming of her voice and identity represents a powerful assertion of agency. Dasgupta writes, “To be reborn from stone is to embrace the fullness of one’s existence, to reclaim the narrative that was stolen” (Dasgupta ,92). This quote signifies the importance of personal agency and the transformative power of self-acceptance in the journey toward reclaiming one’s identity.

Ahalya’s journey is ultimately about reclaiming her identity from the patriarchal definitions that seek to confine her. As she begins to understand the layers of her identity—both imposed and self-defined—Ahalya becomes more empowered to assert her individuality. The process of reclaiming identity is articulated in Ahalya’s realisation that “my worth is not determined by my roles, but by the essence of who I am” (Dasgupta ,117). This declaration signifies a pivotal moment in her journey, where she rejects the societal constructs that have dictated her worth and begins to assert her identity on her own terms. Dasgupta’s portrayal of Ahalya also touches upon the concept of intersectionality, where multiple identities intersect to shape a person’s experiences. Ahalya’s identity as a woman is further complicated by her cultural background, societal status, and personal experiences, illustrating the multifaceted nature of identity politics. For instance, Dasgupta writes, “Ahalya stands at the intersection of tradition and modernity, torn between the expectations of her heritage and the desires for her own future” (Dasgupta 150). This statement highlights the complexities of navigating identity in a rapidly changing world, emphasising that women’s experiences cannot be understood through a singular lens.

Feminist Perspectives on Ahalya’s Character

Koral Dasgupta’s *Ahalya* presents a rich tapestry for feminist analysis, particularly through the character of Ahalya herself. Dasgupta reinterprets the traditional myth, portraying Ahalya not merely as a victim but as a complex figure embodying resilience, strength, and the struggle for self-definition. This section will explore feminist perspectives on Ahalya’s character, focusing on her resistance to patriarchal norms, the challenges she faces, and the significance of her journey in the context of feminist literature. Traditionally, Ahalya is depicted as a passive figure in Hindu mythology, often defined by her relationship with men and ultimately punished for her alleged transgressions. Dasgupta subverts this narrative by presenting Ahalya as an active participant in her own story, challenging the patriarchal structures that seek to define her. Ahalya’s journey reflects a conscious effort to reclaim her narrative and assert her agency. Dasgupta writes, “In a world that seeks to write my story for me, I shall pick up the pen and inscribe my own truth” (Dasgupta,45). This quote highlights Ahalya’s determination to define her identity on her own terms, embodying a feminist spirit of resistance against societal expectations.

Ahalya’s character evolves from silence to self-assertion, marking a significant shift in her identity. In a patriarchal society, where women’s voices are often marginalised, Ahalya’s journey underscores the importance of reclaiming one’s voice as an act of empowerment. Dasgupta emphasises this transformation through Ahalya’s declaration, “My silence was my prison, but I shall no longer remain shackled” (Dasgupta 89). This quote illustrates the power of self-expression in breaking free from societal constraints. Ahalya’s willingness to speak out not only empowers her but also serves as a powerful statement against the cultural norms that seek to silence women. The relationships Ahalya forms throughout the novella are pivotal in shaping her identity and resistance to patriarchy. While male characters often embody patriarchal values, Ahalya’s connections with other women become a source of support and empowerment. Dasgupta writes, “In the embrace of sisterhood, Ahalya found strength that no man could provide” (Dasgupta 107). This quote underscores the importance of female solidarity



in Ahalya's journey. Dasgupta highlights that through these relationships, Ahalya learns to navigate her identity and assert her autonomy, illustrating the transformative power of female friendships in the face of patriarchal oppression.

Ahalya's struggles reflect the intersection of the personal and the political, a key theme in feminist theory. Her personal experiences with patriarchy and societal expectations resonate with broader feminist issues, making her story a microcosm of the larger feminist movement. Dasgupta poignantly writes, "Ahalya's fight is not just for herself but for every woman silenced by the weight of tradition" (Dasgupta 124). This quote emphasises the collective nature of Ahalya's struggle, framing her journey as part of a larger battle against systemic oppression. Ahalya's character becomes a symbol of resistance, highlighting the importance of individual narratives within the collective feminist discourse.

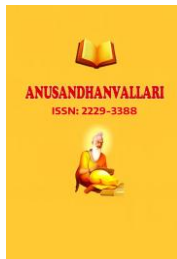
Ahalya's transformation from a figure of shame to one of empowerment is central to Dasgupta's feminist narrative. By reclaiming her identity and asserting her agency, Ahalya embodies the potential for rebirth and renewal. Her journey symbolises the resilience of women in the face of adversity and serves as a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggle for gender equality. Dasgupta writes, "To rise from the ashes of shame is to embrace the strength within" (Dasgupta 135). This quote captures the essence of Ahalya's character as she transcends her past and redefines herself. Ahalya's rebirth signifies not only her personal liberation but also a broader message of hope for women seeking to reclaim their identities.

Ahalya's Agency and Empowerment

In *Ahalya*, Koral Dasgupta intricately portrays Ahalya's journey toward self-discovery, agency, and empowerment, challenging the traditional narratives surrounding her character. Ahalya evolves from a passive figure, often relegated to the margins of her own story, to a dynamic agent of change who actively reclaims her narrative. This section will explore the various dimensions of Ahalya's agency and empowerment, highlighting key moments and quotes that illustrate her transformation. At the outset of the narrative, Ahalya's agency is significantly constrained by the patriarchal structures that dictate her existence. Her identity is largely defined by her relationships with men, and she is often portrayed as a passive recipient of societal norms. This initial suppression is illustrated when Ahalya reflects, "I am but a shadow in my own life, defined by the expectations of others" (Dasgupta 23). This quote emphasises her feeling of invisibility and the constraints imposed upon her by patriarchal society.

A pivotal moment in Ahalya's journey occurs when she begins to recognise the limitations of her identity. This self-awareness marks the beginning of her quest for agency. Dasgupta writes, "To awaken is to confront the uncomfortable truths that lie within" (Dasgupta 54). This quote encapsulates Ahalya's realisation that she must confront her internalised beliefs about her worth and identity to reclaim her agency. Through this awakening, Ahalya embarks on a journey of self-discovery, exploring her desires, aspirations, and the constraints that have held her captive. This shift in perspective becomes the foundation for her subsequent empowerment.

Ahalya's agency is further demonstrated through her ability to make choices that reflect her desires rather than societal expectations. By asserting her right to choose, Ahalya defies the norms that have traditionally constrained women. Dasgupta emphasises this theme when Ahalya declares, "I choose to define myself, not as a reflection of others, but as a being of my own making" (Dasgupta 76). This quote signifies a transformative moment in Ahalya's journey, where she takes ownership of her identity and asserts her autonomy. The act of choice becomes a powerful tool for empowerment, enabling Ahalya to navigate her circumstances with intention and purpose. Her journey illustrates the importance of agency in the quest for self-definition, reflecting broader feminist principles that advocate for women's rights to make choices about their lives. While Ahalya initially navigates a world dominated by patriarchal relationships, she discovers empowerment through the support and solidarity of other women.



Dasgupta highlights the significance of female friendships as a source of strength and resilience. Ahalya states, “In the company of women, I found the courage to be seen and heard” (Dasgupta 98). This quote underscores the transformative power of sisterhood, where Ahalya learns to assert her identity and embrace her agency in a supportive environment. The relationships Ahalya cultivates with other women serve as a counterbalance to the patriarchal influences in her life. These connections not only validate her experiences but also empower her to challenge the norms that seek to define her.

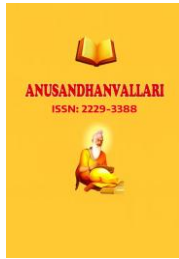
As Ahalya gains agency, she transforms into a symbol of resistance against patriarchal oppression. Her journey reflects a broader narrative of women reclaiming their identities and challenging societal norms. Dasgupta writes, “Ahalya’s rise is not just personal; it is a revolution in a world that seeks to silence her” (Dasgupta, 142). This statement highlights Ahalya’s role as an emblem of empowerment, representing the collective struggle of women to assert their agency in the face of systemic oppression. Ahalya’s transformation from a silenced figure to a vocal advocate for her identity signifies a broader feminist movement, where women actively challenge the constraints imposed upon them. This evolution reflects the potential for empowerment through self-assertion and resistance. Ultimately, Ahalya’s journey culminates in a profound sense of self-acceptance. As she embraces her agency and reclaims her narrative, she begins to understand that empowerment is rooted in self-love and acceptance. Dasgupta poignantly writes, “To accept myself is to embrace my flaws and strengths, and in this acceptance lies my power” (Dasgupta, 156). This quote encapsulates the essence of Ahalya’s transformation, emphasising the importance of self-acceptance in the journey toward empowerment. By embracing her identity fully, Ahalya exemplifies the feminist principle that true empowerment begins within. Her journey becomes a celebration of individuality and the strength that comes from embracing one’s unique narrative.

Conclusion

In *Ahalya*, Koral Dasgupta presents a compelling critique of patriarchy and the politics of identity. Through the character of Ahalya, the novella explores themes of agency, subjugation, and self-definition, highlighting the complexities of women’s experiences within a patriarchal society. Dasgupta’s narrative challenges traditional representations of women in mythology, advocating for empowerment and self-actualization. By engaging with feminist literary criticism, this paper underscores the significance of Ahalya’s story in contemporary discussions on gender and identity. Dasgupta’s portrayal of Ahalya serves as a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggle for women to assert their identities and challenge oppressive structures. As Ahalya reclaims her narrative, she embodies the resilience of women navigating the complexities of patriarchy, making her story both timeless and relevant. In *Ahalya*, Koral Dasgupta effectively critiques the impact of patriarchy on women’s identities.

Through Ahalya’s struggles, Dasgupta highlights the complexities of navigating a patriarchal society, emphasising the tension between societal expectations and personal desires. *Ahalya’s* journey from silence to self-assertion serves as a powerful reminder of the resilience of women and their capacity to reclaim their narratives. In *Ahalya*, Koral Dasgupta skilfully explores the politics of identity, illustrating how societal expectations, personal desires, and cultural contexts shape Ahalya’s journey. Through the fluidity of identity, the significance of reclaiming one’s narrative, and the complexities of intersectionality, Dasgupta presents a nuanced portrayal of a woman striving for self-definition in a patriarchal world.

Ahalya’s journey serves as a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggle for women to assert their identities and challenge the societal norms that seek to define them. In *Ahalya*, Koral Dasgupta presents a multifaceted character whose journey resonates deeply within feminist discourse. Through *Ahalya’s* resistance to patriarchal norms, reclamation of her voice, and transformation from victimhood to empowerment, Dasgupta challenges traditional narratives and highlights the complexities of women’s experiences. Ahalya’s character serves as a powerful symbol of resilience and agency, embodying the ongoing struggle for self-definition and gender equality in a patriarchal world.



References

- [1] Beauvoir, Simone de. The Second Sex. Vintage, 2011
- [2] Dasgupta , Koral. Ahalya. HarperCollins India, 2019.
- [3] Irigaray, Luce. This Sex Which Is Not One. Cornell University Press, 1985.
- [4] Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." Feminist Review, no. 30, 1988, pp. 61-88.
- [5] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, 1988, pp. 271-313.
- [6] Reddy, Chitra. "Feminist Perspectives on Mythology." Indian Journal of Gender Studies, vol. 23, no. 2, 2016, pp. 151-169.