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Protest of Woman through Silence in Sreedevi's "Shilpe-rupini"

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Myths are the important features in every culture and they have existed in every society. Indeed, it seems to be a basic constituent of human culture, because the variety is so great, it is difficult to generalise about the nature of myths but it is clear that in their general characteristic and in their details people's myths reflect, express and explore their self-image. The study of myth is thus of central importance in the study both of individual societies and human culture as a whole.

Myths have always been powerful tools in managing societies. Myths have helped naturalising social orders. Myths have told us that this is how things have always been. But myths have also been used equally or powerfully by radical elements. Now-a-days many Indian writers demythify some characters in Indian mythology and make it more human and credible. Retelling of mythology is a common practice in literature. For the past few decades, the practice of retelling of mythology in literature, especially in Indian writing in English has undergone remarkable changes catering to the expectations of the modern readers.

Retelling of ancient mythology is a common practice in Indian Writing in English. Starting from Raja Rao, the retelling of myth can be viewed even in the contemporary writer Amish Tirupathi. For instance, the portrayal of Shiva as a Tibetan in *Shiva's Trilogy* by Amish Tirupathi, the story of Karna through the eyes of his wife Uruvi in *Karna's Wife: The Outcaste's*



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Queen by Kavita Kané, Jesus surviving the crucifixion and living in India in *The Rozabal Line* by Ashwin Sanghi and several other works. The list is endless.

K. B. Sreedevi, made much use of the Ahalya myth. She is a famous Malayalam writer known for her concern for the predicament of women. She has written many short stories and four novels. The short story “Shilpe-rupini” is written in Malayalam and later translated into English by Gita Krishnankutty as “Woman of Stone” (1990). The short story is about the flash back of Ahalya’s life and some happenings after her release from her husband’s curse. She travels through the forest to attend a ritual at Sage Valmiki’s ashram.

“Woman of Stone” reflects upon the relations among tapas, freedom and blame. As a wife, Ahalya lived with Gautama without any affection as he is committed only to penance. Though she was turned into a stone after her union with Indra, she suggested that her life story is made to do penance for her misdeed. Lord Rama’s touch brings her back from the curse and makes her think Rama is more compassionate than her husband, Gautama. She felt that it would be better if all men could be like Rama. But she is shocked to hear Sita’s banishment by Rama. This makes Ahalya realise that sometimes Rama is also jealous and doubts his wife’s fidelity. Finally, Ahalya turns again into a stone ensuring that neither Gautama nor Rama will disappoint her again.

The story opens in a forest where Ahalya is nostalgic of her coming into the same forest on a swan’s back with her father, Lord Brahma. Since she was a nature-lover, Brahma slowed down the celestial chariot on the bank of a river near a hermitage. She felt the fragrance of the sacrificial fire of a sage. This happened some thousand years back. Everything she admired in the past changed except for Ahalya. “Time had changed, not Ahalya” (Hereafter “Woman of Stone” is abbreviated as “WS” 142). She walks deep into the forest and admires the beauty of nature that made her happy once.



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Now in the present scene, she requests her husband's permission to attend the rituals conducted by Sage Valmiki and on his permission, hurries to the ritual alone in the forest. Again she goes down memory lane to recall how her husband accompanied her wherever she went. Now Gautama believes that her wife won't be harmed by anyone. Ahalya too has transformed into a courageous woman receiving the blessings from her husband. The life of the couple changed entirely after Ahalya's deliverance. This is because of Rama's confidential speech to them. He advised her not to fear anything except adharma:

“Once you acquire spiritual strength, a quarter-minute is all you need to kill 14,000 evil demons. Spiritual strength surpasses physical strength.” (“WS” 142)

Ahalya expresses her devotion to Lord Rama when she meets him. The moment she saw Rama she realised the rewards of her *tapas* (penance) when she was a stone. She compares Rama with Gautama and suggests that sages are meant for cursing without understanding the situations, but Lords are meant to offer salvation and forgiveness. Rama's gentle voice still rings in her heart that adds to the confidence in her. “Ahalya, I see your heart. Awaken from the sleep which traps you in illusion” (“WS” 142). By marrying Gautama, Ahalya gets the status of a wife, by delivering from the curse; Rama makes her a self-confident individual. Rama killed not only the demons inside the forest but also the distance and misunderstanding between Gautama and Ahalya.

Ahalya walks further and admires the music of birds that delights her ears. The past opens many doors inside her mind. Once in the past as she stood as a stone after the curse, she hears some voices of women from Mithila nearing the hermitage of Gautama to pick *lavanyakam* flower for Sita. This plant was brought from Heaven by Ahalya and planted in her garden. By offering this flower regularly for worship one may get her dream-husband. Sita who dreams of Rama and wishes to marry him offers this flower for worship to let her dream come true. Even the two *krauncha* (the crane) birds tell that Rama's marriage to Sita will surely bring good



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fortune to Mithila. The maids hurry away from the place when they come to know that it is the very same place where innocent Ahalya fell into disrepute. This conversation makes Ahalya think that the society still holds her in esteem. She even thinks that Sita is more fortunate to get a caring and loving husband like Rama. Later, Rama marries Sita after he restores the life of Ahalya.

By recalling the past, Ahalya reaches the River Tamasa, which is as pure as the minds of good people. Ahalya decides to stay for a while near the riverbank. Suddenly, she hears the weeping of a woman, who is from Valmiki's hermitage. The woman states that the world is nearing its destruction. Ahalya is confused and tries to console the woman but shocked to hear that Rama has abandoned Sita who is in her family way. "Shri Rama, the ruler of Ayodhya, has abandoned his wife Sita, full with child" ("WS" 144).

The woman came to know this when Valmiki went for his afternoon rituals to the River Tamasa, found Sita and offered shelter in his hermitage. Before she completes the sentence, Ahalya groans loudly and says, "The fire has abandoned its own flame?" ("WS" 145). Ahalya's voice becomes fainter and fainter and women in the riverbank rush towards her and find that she has turned into a stone. They all look at each other and in one voice say, "But this is Gautama's wife" ("WS" 145).

Ahalya for all these days was thinking that Rama is a noble man and one who understands the feelings and emotions of a woman, whereas Gautama is a failure. The foremost reason for the curse of Gautama is that he fails to understand her. If he had fully understood her, he might not have cursed and made her suffer all these years. After she hears the banishment of Sita by Rama, Ahalya concludes that even Rama is not mature enough to believe his wife like Gautama.

The people find some footprints with a thunderbolt and a fish on the head of the statue of Ahalya and imprints of Rama's hands on its feet. The thunderbolt and the fish signify Indra's



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role as the deity of rain. The monsoon brings abundant fish in rivers, as well as abundant harvest. The imprints of Rama's hands occurred when he bowed at Ahalya's feet after freeing her from the curse. K. B. Sreedevi portrays Ahalya as a symbol of innocence who turned into an independent woman. She took a decision of turning into a stone on her own as she had a fresh will.

There is an obvious connection between Sita and Ahalya in the *Ramayana*. Aside from being flawlessly beautiful, they share an unusual connection through their names. Sita—furrow in Sanskrit—is named so because she was found at the tip of a plough. Ahalya's name contains the Sanskrit word for plough. Both women live in the forest after marriage and both their beauties drew the attention of kings—Indra to Ahalya, Ravana to Sita. But Sita and Ahalya reject these kings who attempt to impress them with their might, and remain steadfast to their husbands. Indra and Ravana both resort to trickery. They disguise themselves as old men. Indra takes on Gautama's form while Ravana pretends to be an aged beggar. Both of them surrender to the women's charm. Ahalya is ignorant of Indra's impersonation and she yields to Indra's advance as a duty-bound wife. Sita crosses the *lakshmanrekha* (a line drawn by Lakshmana to protect Sita when he goes in search of his brother Lord Rama) to give alms to the needy. Ahalya, despite Gautama's saying that she is impure, she proves her innocence by not resisting the curse. Sita faces similar charges of impurity and comes through a fire ordeal. However, she is abandoned in the forest. In addition, Sita and Ahalya also survive clean and blameless for years in wilderness because of their husbands' lack of trust. Effectively, they are silenced and kept away from society and thus handicapped to feel free and explain their stand of the world.

Pradip Bhattacharya in an article "The Riddle of the Pancha Kanya: A Five Maidens", has pointed out that Anita Ratnam has performed *Bharatanatyam* (a classical dance of Tamil Nadu) dance based on K. B. Sreedevi's "Shilpe-rupini" in a television programme. The synopsis provides an excellent statement of the relevance of the ancient tale for women today:



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This twentieth century use of Ahalya as a metaphor for patriarchy, exploitation and society's double standards carries the story to a surprising climax. Most dialogues on women end with hope, though reality often proves to be the opposite. In the trap of modernity—science and progress—women are caught in a double bind in the home and outside. They are expected to be superwomen. (6)

K. B. Sreedevi's short story learns that Sita has been subjugated to ill-treatment for the second time when Rama sent her when she was in her family way into the forest, driven by the unbearable gossips of his subjects. On learning this Ahalya turns into a stone as Rama falls short of her expectations as an ideal husband.

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