



Ahalya

by Koral Dasgupta, Pan Macmillan, 2020, 204 pages

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Book Review

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“Go woman, find your world yourself. The joy
you seek deserves to be discovered.” (Dasgupta loc. 37)

Ahalya, the first book of the Sati-series by Koral Dasgupta, claims to be a re-telling of the well-known mythological account of a hapless woman and her plight under the brunt of a patriarchal social order. Instead of reiterating the familiar tale of Ahalya’s seduction and her consequent cursed fate, the writer chooses to focus on the standpoint of the woman who relates the story of her own journey towards self-discovery. Elements of memory, history, myth and bildungsroman intersect to create an intricately detailed narrative that ruptures the demureness and over-emphasis on docile chastity associated with the traditional image of the Hindu woman. In her attempt to prioritize the voice of the woman, Dasgupta almost re-interprets the popular notions of virginity and virtue accorded to the five women or *panchkanyas* of Hindu mythology—Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari. It is believed that Ahalya, the most beautiful creation of Brahma, was punished for no fault of her own, with no scope given to her to assert any degree of agency. In Dasgupta’s narrative, however, she tries to unravel such a monolithic reading of Ahalya’s story, delving into the inner recesses of her mind and making her responsible for taking certain conscious decisions which steer the

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course of her life. It is important to note that Dasgupta interferes minimum with the main plot, instead devoting greater attention towards upholding the first-person narratorial voice of her heroine.

Ahalya is constructed as a highly conscious being who revels in her own existence as well as her sensual perceptions of the world and its wonders since her creation by Brahma. Even when she is initially described as a formless entity, floating about the clouds with her mother, the Mist, her consciousness is quite active. Her precocity towards knowing more about “the ever insatiable” (Dasgupta loc. 17) Indra during her conversations with the Mist makes it evident that she is unabashed about her own sexual passions, so much so that she fantasizes about a personal encounter with the mighty god. She even goes on to wonder if she would be able to “pose before him the most impossible challenge of the cosmos. Would the lustful King of Devas, desirous of and desired by the universe, like to explore the faceless? Can he touch in the absence of skin? Can he pleasure the one without a body? Would the greatest lover known for his rugged energies make love with this soul?” (loc. 17). Interestingly enough, this heightened consciousness plays a crucial role in her maturation as she reaches adolescence and a greater sexual awakening in her bodily form. She is ecstatic on becoming a human, celebrating her physical charms while wondering “if it were made to spark a revolution!” (loc. 17). It is this revolutionary quest towards self-actualization that is narrated by Dasgupta in highly poetic and lucid language, evocative imagery and meaningful symbolism, all the while making certain that the focus remains on Ahalya’s thoughts and emotions. Ahalya goes on to develop a natural attraction for her sage-husband, Gautam despite having been given away in marriage to him at a tender age by Brahma. The initial lack of agency in expressing consent gradually mutates into a strong sexual passion for her very able-bodied partner whom she decides to seduce. Seduction and sexuality are thus not associated with any kind of negative connotation in the narrative (for instance, social taboos), but rather perceived as the cement of a legitimate marital relationship. Ahalya’s passion humanizes Gautam and helps him evolve “from a hermit to a husband” (Roy n.p.) just as she herself appears to blend the notions of idealized femininity and lived womanhood in the course of her diverse experiences, both physical and psychological.

While this man and wife relationship forms the bulk of the narrative, but there are several other relationships that Ahalya has to negotiate and that significantly inform her journey towards self-actualization. Her relationships with her father and creator, Brahma, her mother, the Mist and her sister/confidante, the river Mandakini sustain her throughout. In particular, the bond she shares with her mother is given a greater complexity– the Mist plays a crucial role in mentoring her, “guiding, persuading, and warning Ahalya, by turns” (Roy n.p.) as she embarks upon the pursuit of selfhood. The mother, not a conventional figure of authority, is recast here as the prime

source of strength and knowledge. In fact, Brahma himself acknowledges:

“A mother is another name for unyielding, aggressive power. She is the embodiment of indulgence and restraint. She is the keeper, the protector. She restricts to keep all harm away. She beholds the baby with her softness, yet forms a tough cast around it to keep intruders at bay. She is the first teacher starting the learning process in confinement, by sharing the system of body and life even before the baby is born. She is the form of knowledge that results from reflex.” (Dasgupta loc. 5)

This reframing of traditional feminine roles celebrates the agency of women despite having been subject to various restrictions imposed upon them by societal expectations. That deeper attention is called to such alternative perceptions of womanhood underlines the revisionist historiographic approach consciously adopted by the writer. It is also interesting to note the lavish descriptions of nature incorporated within the narrative that are perhaps intimately connected with the celebration of unrestrained femininity. Nature is traditionally ascribed to the idea of woman and through the intricate, elaborate passages devoted towards detailing the landscape, the writer reminds the readers of an ancient, moral connection shared between humanity and Nature. This idea of the ‘sacred feminine’ however is not to reinstate certain gendered roles of women in society but rather to evoke a sense of solidarity amidst the oppression meted out by a gender-disparate societal set-up.

In an interview, Dasgupta explains her understanding of the term *sati* as it applied to women like Ahalya in the mythological texts: “Today in our feminist debate we’re talking about fertility of the mind over virginity of the body. It’s about your consent. So, the same thing was being said in this ancient text...That’s the reason they’re called virgins. Because their mind is pure, they had reasons for the decisions they took, and they win against their society” (Agrawal n.p.). In her re-telling, Ahalya is not a defeated woman at the mercy of patriarchy, but an agentive being with higher sentience who is answerable only to her own self for her actions. In Dasgupta’s imagination, the concepts of the *panch-kanya* and *panch-sati*, albeit belonging to different traditions of thought in Indian mythology, merge together to represent an alternative model of womanhood. Ahalya herself proclaims: “Sanctity, I learnt from the Mist later, is a metaphysical way of remaining pure, godly. Pure at heart, pure in means and ends, pure by body, pure by faith. She called it ‘Sati’” (Dasgupta loc. 20). In a society trying to curb her flowering sexuality and youthful passions, she takes it upon herself to explore her own curious desires, all the while keeping a firm hold on her own mind rather than faltering under the pressure to remain ‘chaste’. When Brahma send her to earth, asking her to “explore [her]self... Find that magnificence within the mundane ... [and discover the] science of life” (loc. 21), she exactly does so without any inhibition. Her initial feel of desperation and defeat at being unable to

comprehend the reason behind the strange manner of her creation gradually transforms into a spirit of initiative in order to let her “virtues be explored, [her] beauty appreciated, [her] seduction gratified” (loc. 7). Even when she is cursed, it does not deter her from desiring to experience life to the fullest, but instead encourages her to display small but significant acts of resistance towards the onslaught of patriarchal tyranny. It is undoubtable that *Ahalya* bears significant affinity with the expanding line of postfeminist thought. By emphasizing upon the heroine’s sexuality and questioning existing notions of femininity, it complicates the way we understand gender differences and relations. Borrowing upon Ann Brooks’ theory of postfeminism (1997), *Ahalya* can also be read as celebrating what it is to be a ‘woman’ rather than emphatically laying claims on the erasure of gender differences. Dasgupta tactfully draws upon a wealth of diverse experiences that would perhaps be relatable to a larger group of women, thereby subtly politicizing and provoking a host of collective responses towards injustices inflicted upon womankind.

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BIO

Dr. Stella Chitrlekha Biswas completed her PhD in April, 2022 from the Centre for Comparative Literature and Translation Studies, Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar, India. Her research interests include juvenile literature, pedagogy, speculative fiction, postcolonial studies, sexuality and gender studies, etc. She has published papers in peer-reviewed journals such as *Bookbird*, *Indialogs*, *postScriptum*, *Middle Flight*, *Lapis Lazuli*, *Café Dissensus* and has also contributed chapters to a number of edited volumes by national and international publishers of repute. She has a few forthcoming publications by the Edinburgh University Press, Bloomsbury Press, Routledge and the *Nordic Journal of Childlit Aesthetics*.