



## EMENDING RAMAYANA'S AHALYA THROUGH ANAND NEELAKANTAN'S VANARA

**MOKANA SUNDARI M.**

Assistant Professors  
Department of English (SF)  
PSG College of Arts & Science  
Coimbatore  
(TN) INDIA

**DR. V. M. SARANYA**

Assistant Professors  
Department of English (SF)  
PSG College of Arts & Science  
Coimbatore  
(TN) INDIA

### ABSTRACT

*Indian Epics are always a Pandora box of characters and stories. Many voguish retellings of it prove that the Indian epics have not sounded most of the female characters or at least not in depth. Most of the female characters of Indian epics are characterized in an aesthetic sense. But, the modish writers depicts most of such female characters has their novel protagonist. This makes the readers to know the sharp voices of the less voiced women of Indian epics. These modern writers help the readers to recall and rememorize the epic women in their minds. This research article attempts to bring out one such stereotypical women character Ahalya from Ramayana to the most contemporary facet portrayed by Anand Neelakantan in his novel Vanara.*

**Keywords:** Ahalya, Narratives, Retellings, Curse, Redemption, Contemporary

### INTRODUCTION

New-fangled writers break the platitudinous women of Indian Epics to give them voice and required prominence in their novels. One such novel is Anand Neelakantan's *Vanara*. This article attempts to pen down the juxtaposition of the less voiced woman Ahalaya in *Ramayana* to that of *Vanara*. Anand portrays the image of dormant yet strong Ahalya in this novel. Through this article one will be able to differentiate the classical image of Ahalya, who is hardly heard, with the image portrayed by Anand in *Vanara*.



Ahalya's story takes place in the 'Balakanda', of Valmiki *Ramayana*. She is known to be created by Brahma from the ashes of seven seers just to pull down the ego of Urvashi (the celestial nymph). Ahalya is considered to be the most striking lady on earth. Hence, all the Devas had a desire to attain her in the hands of marriage. Therefore, Lord Brahma announced a contest stating that one who travels around all the three worlds at once can win the hands of Ahalya. Indra, who was so fascinated by the beauty of Ahalya went on to take up the trip with his mystical powers. However, Sage Narada interrupted telling that according to Vedas, the cow at its time of labour is considered equal to that of the three worlds. In that case, the winner of the test is Maharishi Gautama, who circled the cow for his daily pooja routine.

Indra's infatuation on Ahalya does not get vanished with her marriage with Gautama. One day, Indra saw Ahalya taking bath at a river he followed her till her hut, where he found Gautama too. That night Indra planned to fulfill his lust over Ahalya. For which he gimmicked the sound of a rooster, which made Gautama to leave the hut for his early morning bath thinking it to be dawn. Now Indra disguised himself as Gautama and fulfilled his lust over Ahalya. Various Narratives of *Ramayana* gives different images of Ahalya of this act. One of the narratives tells that she was aware of the disguise yet she allowed Indra to advance. Another plot purifies Ahalya by saying that she has overwhelming love for her husband Gautama, which made her to unnotice the disguise. However, on the return of Gautama, he visualizes what had happened through his miraculous powers and curses both for their act. Even the curses of Gautama have variations in the classical retellings. Few mention that Ahalya was cursed to be a stone, while another one tells that she was cursed to do a lifelong penance in a hidden or invisible hermitage. Same variation goes on with the curse on Indra. In some retellings his testicles was removed so that he remains impotent. In the other, he was cursed to have thousand vulvas all around his body, which was later converted into his thousand eyes as per Indian myths. However, all text ends the story of Ahalya with the redemption of her through Lord Rama.

*Vanara* depicts the modernized feminist version of Ahalya's story. Yet, it can also be considered as the retelling of the most early version of Ramayana in Sanskrit, *Kathasarisayara* (11<sup>th</sup> century CE). In which, Ahalya fulfills the desires of Indra willingly in his undisguised. It is portrayed as more of an illegal post-marital affair. *Vanara*'s central plot is on the characters of Bali, Sugreeva and Tara. Hence, the story of Ahalya is dealt till the mid-end of the classical ones. But, still Anand has not compromised in detailing the character of Ahalya. As Pudhumaipittan's epigraph for his *Sabavimochanam* tells, "For those acquainted with the *Ramayana*, this might be comprehensible, unpalatable too. I am not concerned about that."(Arulmugil, 22) Same saying works quite well for Anand and his *Vanara*.



In *Vanara* Anand has dedicated eighty percent of the first three chapters for Ahalya. She is shown as a symbol of women, who has a post-martial illegal affair. But, not in a displeasing or questionable way. Anand does not show her with dubiousness, instead he just questions the society which thinks ghastly about her behavior. Anand questions the society through the words of Bali, her one of the orphan Vanara sons. The novel starts with the eight year old Sugreeva running towards the hut of Ahalya with a sparrow nest in his hands. He entered to ask some eatables for the hatchlings. This is where Sugreeva witnesses the half-naked Ahalya kissing Indra with her eyes closed. At the sight of Sugreeva, Indra starts to abuse him verbally. Ahalya, who now opened her eyes because of Indra's rebuke, tries to stop him by telling that Sugreeva is a small boy and she assures that he will not let it out to anyone. Indra in turn smashes the nest and asks Sugreeva to keep his mouth shut just to avoid his meetings with Ahalya becoming complicated. Through the words of Indra, Anand mentions that "She is the mother of the ashram. She will do what she pleases. So you will keep your mouth shut, understand? If she wants to sleep with anyone that is her business." (3) and asks Sugreeva to leave the hut right then.

Bali later on comes to know about this episode through Sugreeva. But he does not seem to be as dazed or worried as that of his brother. In fact, Bali's retort was to scoff at the hap. He also asks his brother to shut his mouth about this matter. Bali also wishes that Sugreeva should not have witnessed the incident as it kept haunting his brother badly. Sugreeva somehow felt to inform Gautama, the chef of the ashram and his adopted father, about it. But, Bali shouts him mentioning that Gautama never had any fatherly image for them. He also says that if he wanted to be loyal he should show his loyalty only towards Ahalya by alluding her assists for them. "Fool, if you, need to show any loyalty, you should show it to that lady and not to that old man. Has he ever bothered to speak to you, even look at you? For him, we're mere monkey boys," (19). Bali at the same time feels that there is no fault to be found in Ahalya's actions. He feels that men do such stuffs and so women also have equal rights and needs to do the same. No one has any right to deny anything to a woman just raising their gender as a reason. There was a huge racketing between the brothers on whether to let out the matter to Gautama or not. Atlast, Bali diverts Sugreeva and wins over the conversation by telling that loyalty, rules, customs, of Devas and Asuras need not be bothered or applied by them as they are just mere 'Vana Naras' (mere animals) "The rules aren't set by any books written by some old croak under the influence of Soma. They call us Vanaras, the monkey men. So be it. As far as Vanaras are concerned, Ahalya did no wrong. So you keep your mouth shut." (20)

Bali hears a huge uproar at Sage Gautama's hut. He runs to witness the happening, where he finds Gautama being grotesque and pale when four Sanyasis (his hermit students) drags the scudded Indra out of Gautama's hut. Another Sanyasi throws Ahalya at the feet of Gautama by dragging her by her hair. Her hair is undone and clothes are in disarray. Everyone around expects Ahalya to cry and beg for forgiveness but she remained quiet and firm. She shouted

MOKANA SUNDARI M.

DR. V. M. SARANYA

3 Page



to exculpate Indra but Indra said that it was he who disguised as Gautama and seduced her and begged to vindicate Ahalya. Whereas Ahalya with her head erect states that “No. I invited him to my bed, Why should not I?” (23) for which Gautama curses her in a shrill voice, “I curse you, You’re stone-hearted I curse you to be a stone.” (23)

Ahalya is dragged to be chained to a rock when she gazed at Bali and mistook him to be the informer. She shouted “It could be only you. Your brother is an innocent boy. Only you would be so heartless to inform my husband. Didn’t I feed you? Didn’t I save your life? This is how you repay?” (25). Bali searched for his brother from the beginning of the chaos but could not find him. Meanwhile, Gautama orders the Sanyasis to castrate Indra, so that he will remain impotent. Bali tries hard to prove his guiltlessness on the tumult happened. But, Ahalya does not believe him and she curses Bali, “Get lost. Get lost. I curse you. Let your brother be the cause of your death. I curse you. Let you die as an animal.” (25) Then Bali leaves the ashram to find Sugreeva, from where the plot of *Vanara* settles down. Anand does not reveal the readers what happened to Ahalya after Bali’s exit.

In chapter thirty-seven, Anand just mentions about Ahalya by Hanuman to Sugreeva in the hut of Shabari as “the poor woman [Ahalya] was chained for she had sinned. Chained to a rock for so many years. Rama freed her. He gave redemption to a fallen woman.” (264) from which one can assume what has happened to Ahalya after Bali’s dispersal as well as her redemption by Rama. Anand as portrayed Ahalya as one of the common women with her own manners and emotions. She is not the one with the image of a classical innocent Ahalya, the purest wife of Sage Gautama. Instead, she is characterized as a normal woman of vehemence and feelings. Anand did not find any fault with her; he also did not want her to be ashamed of her act. She is made to voice out her aptness and scope to live better than to be a trifling maid-wife of Sage Gautama. It sounds to be controversial but if one looks from the perspective of Ahalya, it may seem to be a different world of woman. In the eyes of Anand’s Ahalya, Indra seems to be the one who deserves her just because of the plain reason she loves to be with him. Through Indra she fulfills her desire to be a lovable wife to someone who loves her back the same way as she does. Anand also gives reason for her illegal affair is because of her loathing marital affair. She discerns as a maid rather than a wife of Gautama. “I was married against my wish. This old man never wanted a wife but a maid to look after him. I have done that well. I have looked after him, fed him, bathed him, nursed him. But I have my needs too—“(23)

Anand through his Ahalya wanted to impart that the voices of women are also to be heard and no matter who, how and from where they are. They too have wishes, dreams, needs, desires and passion of their own, men does not have any rights or decision making control over it. No man owns any women and vice versa too. Society has a whole gives a tangled image to women just because of their gender. There is nothing called as a universal moral or



values, things changes from place to place, time to time, and sometimes from person to person. No one has a right over other person's thoughts or wishes, especially men over women's. Women are too strong and deep in their senses, once it is triggered they do not bother about anything or anybody. They will start feel that they have independence in decision making.

Anand's Ahalya can be seen as a symbol of one who does not want to live a forced upon life just because it has already been forced upon. To accept a life and live as it is, is laid by the society but that does not mean everyone abide by that way of living. Ahalya in *Vanara* sets out as an example for that. Whereas, Gautama seems to represent the image and condition of men who force things upon women unwillingly and the result of that. Thus, Anand's Ahalya can be mostly categorized as a contemporary woman rather than an austere Indian mythological character.

## WORKS CITED

### Primary Source:

Neelakantan, Anand. *Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara*. Penguin Books, 2018.

### Secondary Source:

Rajagopalachari, C.R. *Ramayana*. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2013.

Arulmugil, C. 'Redemption of Ahalya in Pudhumaipittan's *Akalikai* and *Sabavimochanam*.' *ISOR-JHSS*, pp. 21-23.