Locating Memory as a Tool for Resilience and Metamorphosis: A Reflective Analysis of Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening*

Arya. N
Dr. Teena Rachel Thomas

Every single person on the earth is engulfed in a pool of memories. Because our life, our becoming, and belonging depend on our ability to remember, record, and forget. While these statements encapsulate the inevitable presence of memories in our daily life, they also additionally stress the fundamental role memory plays in crafting our identities, experiences, explaining how our interactions with others and our environment, as well as our sense of self are intertwined to memories. Trauma can also drastically affect memory, influencing not just how we recall events but also the way we respond to the surroundings. Hence, recollections pertaining to trauma furnish a more fertile ground for memory research. Memory studies has hitherto, progressed to a burgeoning state where, the very act of remembering past events can elicit strong emotional debates and intense political engagements, instead of simply dealing with a stored set of past information. *Ahalya's Awakening* by Kavita Kane goes beyond being a captivating narrative of memorabilia and traces the eponymous heroine's life journey. The legend is that, Ahalya, a character in the mythology supposedly had to endure a curse from her husband sage Gautam that transformed her into a stone, where she remained forever. This curse resulted from her moment of weakness, when Indra, posing as her spouse, deceived her. Lord Rama saw her in her stone form as

he was travelling through the woods. By his miraculous touch, she was set free and returned to her original form. Amidst the multitude of characters in the mythological narrative, she was cast as a lady who was punished for her alleged transgression and placed in the background of the narrative. In Kavita Kane's retelling, the author revisits various facets of Ahalya's turbulent past, where the protagonist confronts her trauma, in an act of remembrance to discover atonement. For those like Ahalya, who have undergone distressful events and upsetting occurrences, memory means a lot more than mere recollection and remembrance. Having earned the fame of infidelity, Ahalya shoulders the trauma of being a social misfit. However, her look back to the stigmatised past rather causes a sharp revival of memory, that aids her to re-visit her repressed identity which further sets off resilience and metamorphosis. De-traumatisation occurs explicitly, and a coping mechanism is eventually developed as an outcome. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's conceptual notions of trauma and memory, the investigation undertaken considers Indian writer in English, Kavita Kane's select mythological re-telling*,* with the overarching goal to confront memory at the individual level as well as to show how in certain circumstances, memory can function as an inadvertent tool for building resilience and effecting metamorphosis. Katharine Hodgkin's and Susannah Radstone's take on transforming dimensions of memory are additionally utilised to support the claims.

Keywords: Awakening, De-traumatisation, Memory, Metamorphosis, Resilience, Trauma

> Without memory one cannot live, for it is what elevates man above beasts, determines the contours of the human soul; and yet it is at the same time so unreliable, elusive,   treacherous (Kapuœciñski, 2004, p. 75).

> He who has once began to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments; no image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside; that image, that taste, that touch for whose sake all this has been unfurled and dissected; and now remembrance progresses from small to smallest details, from the smallest to the infinitesimal, while

that which it encounters in these microcosms grows even mightier. (Benjamin, 1978, p. 6)

The insights of Walter Benjamin and Ryszard Kapuœciñski as delineated above, map out the significant wranglings on how every single person on the earth is engulfed in memories, how our life, "our becoming, and belonging depend on our ability to remember, record, and forget" (Garde-Hansen, 2011, p. 18). A boom in memory studies, that was spearheaded by numerous intellectuals, bequeathed this endeavour a new lexicon which is quickly expanding to become an inter disciplinary effort. Popular British Cultural Theory readers Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin in their work *Regimes of Memory* examines the nuanced interactions among memory, modernity, postmodernity, and subsequent epochs, underscoring the resurgence of scholarly and academic interest in the widening vicissitudes of memory research. Furthermore, in *Memory and Methodology*, Susannah Radstone acknowledges the multifaceted nature through which memory assumes distinct significances across diverse cultures, temporal contexts, and imaginative constructs. Memory manifests in eerie and unfamiliar configurations, necessitating the adoption of novel modes of interpretation.

This recognition inevitably gives rise to ontological inquiries pertaining to the contemporary conceptions of memory and its research, wherein memory's ostensibly transparent and unproblematic connection to the past becomes precarious. Consequently, memory's equivocations are becoming more complex in relation to history, contemporary culture, and literature. Like any other theory, Memory Studies' theoretical stances occasionally go through crises, leading to the adoption of divergent representations. Radstone's opinion of memory is fundamentally quotidian based on the radical utopian visions on memory as being liberatory, in opposition to the Freudian, Baudelairean, Proustian postulations of memory as being of seemingly fragile value. All these inevitably point to the theory's essentially flexible nature and ever wavering dimensions.

In essence, it can be deduced that the process of recalling a complex network of past events often stirs deep emotional discussions

and fervent political involvement. This goes beyond merely retrieving stored information; it involves engaging with the intricate and sometimes contentious layers of past, which can fuel strong feelings and debates. As a result, individuals may find themselves drawn into passionate ruminations driven by their interpretations and emotional responses to these pasts. The reinterpretation of trauma as well as the traumatic past is therefore ushered in as vital to properly decode the politics of memory in the light of scholarly calls to acknowledge the malleable nature of memory. These aspects explain the critical connection between trauma and memory. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's conceptual notions of trauma and memory, this study scans the narrative *Ahalya's Awakening*. Entailing remembrance and forgetting, the study experiments with a distinct way of engaging with memory from the point of view of literary studies. Henceforth, the prime objective here is to confront memory at individual level as well as to demonstrate how in certain circumstances, memory can function as an inadvertent tool for building resilience and effecting metamorphosis as is the case in the select narrative. Katharine Hodgkin's and Susannah Radstone's take on the transforming dimensions of memory and its studies are additionally employed to back up the arguments.

The mythology since eons has contempt Ahalya to be a woman maligned and wholly ostracised from society. Legend has it that she had to suffer a curse that turned her into a stone, where she stayed for eternity. This curse was the grave consequence of a moment of weakness, when she was tricked by Indra, who disguised himself as her husband. Ahalya's story does not end in despair, despite this enduring punishment. Lord Rama, while travelling through the wilderness saw her in her stone form. She was liberated through his divine touch and was brought back to her former shape. Her story's hallmarks of redemption and divine intervention became apparent by Lord Rama's act of liberation, which not only set her free from the burden of the curse, but also restored her honour and purified her spirit. Therefore, she was relegated to the background in the mythological story as a woman who was punished for her supposed sin.

Kavita Kane's 2019 novel *Ahalya's Awakening*, brings into spotlight the aforementioned snippet from Ramayana and divulges the paradox surrounding the predicament of Ahalya, the eponymous heroine. Kane offers an alternative interpretation of Ahalya's story, portraying her not as a tragic heroine but as a woman whose life, identity, and womanhood were compromised by patriarchal forces. In Kane's vision, Ahalya gains prominence as a major character in the narrative, that bestows ample space for considering her ruminations and justifications. Kane's narrative encircles the lives of the trio-Ahalya, sage Gautam and Lord Indra, while Ahalya's journey from a precocious child to a studious and sheltered princess, to the loving wife of sage Gautam is traced with utmost attention. The author thus sketches a personal past for the protagonist as well as a bildungsroman progression for her that has never been covered in Hindu mythology. Ahalya, the daughter of King Mudgal and Queen Nalayani, was regarded as Lord Brahma's most exquisite creation. Being raised among sages gave Ahalya an innate drive to dedicate her life to her studies. While the kingdom was embroiled in battle, Ahalya was sent to Rishi Gautam's ashram, thus, she remained unaware of her family's struggles. Under Gautam's wise guidance, she eventually became a Rishika, gaining immense knowledge. During this time, she fell in love with her mentor, and they got married soon. However, King Nahusha (Indra), driven by his uncontrollable desires, pursued numerous women, eventually set his eyes on the extraordinarily beautiful Ahalya. Indra, disguised as Gautam, approached Ahalya, and despite her partial awareness of the deception, she succumbed to his advances. Ahalya was cursed to become a stone by her own husband on a charge of infidelity with lord Indra. Gautam's curse on Indra was later withdrawn at the insistence of gods, whereas he failed to extend the same benefit to Ahalya. Unfortunately, she had to remain a stone statue until Rama's foot brushed hers years later.

Kane's narrative does not conclude with Ahalya's liberation, even though the mythological story does. Kane revisits the burden of her past, which shows up as extreme desperation and agony. The present narrative manifests an earnest effort to cross check the subtle aspects of Ahalya's traumatic experiences, that are compounded by

the lingering societal perception of her identity and shame. Ahalya is shown as a lady with severe remorse and self-doubt. She deals with betrayal from others as well as from herself (Indra and her husband, Sage Gautam). She considers her acts and the serious repercussions of them after feeling alienated from her cherished spouse, her family, and society. In refuting the French sociologist Maurice Halbwach's theory of collective memory, and the stereotypical denomination of myths helping to "legitimize collectives, providing them with modes of interpretation" (Maurantonio, 2014), the author in this re-telling resorts to what T. E Bosch (2016) calls as an "individual-psychological approach to memory" (p. 3). Turning away from the most popular cultural/collective side of Ahalya's myth, Kane propounds a very subjective side to it in this captivating narrative. Having said that, it is crucial to remember that the chosen text is not a precise memorabilia or "memory novel" (Erll, 2011) in the true meaning of the word. By juxtaposing Ahalya's individual recollection of her own personal trauma with the communal, socio-cultural memory of her as sanctioned by the prevalent mythological discourses, the text's offers a thorough explanation of Ahalya's existence. The novel opens and progresses in third person narration, accompanied by a conclusion in the form of remembrance providing a rationale for the character by referring to her awakening through reminiscence. Through that endeavour, the chronological and geographical contexts are highlighted, illuminating the assumptions and biases behind common mythological portrayals.

Astute attention to the traumatic rupture suffered by Ahalya is the focal point of the text, as it is deeply analytical in giving a compact account of Ahalya's subjective past. While depicting the post traumatic and pre-traumatic phases of Ahalya's life, the select text also manages to paint the picture of the protagonist encountering a diverse spectrum of memories which stem primarily from her traumatic past. The protagonist recalls how her life was overturned by the single act of curse by her husband Gautam. Here in, Ahalya was washed away in the deluge of fear and shame when she was caught with Indra in disguise. Her boundless, exuberant self was broken, casting herself and the turmoil of her wants into the shadows. Gautam's negation and the world's negation forced her to be the 'other', the outsider,

whose fault was irredeemable. The long-lasting effect of this trauma ended up in awful repercussions and irreparable losses. In her individual act of recollection, she negotiates and contests her social, cultural, and mythological identity in the terrain of memories, driving home how the text at hand bears testimony to the fact that "trauma unsettles and forces us to rethink our notions of experience" (Caruth, 1995, p. 4). On that account, the story concentrates on those years of exile, ostracisation, rejection, and stagnation during which she endured remarkable identity changes. These years, in Kane's observation, were Ahalya's formative years, outrightly in contrast to the Ahalya we have come across in mythology, the Ahalya who had lived in utter self-abnegation.

In Michelle Balaev's (2008) observation, critics like Cathy Caruth and Kali Tal assert that "the traumatic experiences lead to the pathological division of identity, leading to the damage to sense of self and a change in consciousness. While the origin of traumatic responses remains ambiguous, the event remains ever present. Trauma manifests itself through flashbacks" (p. 40). After long years of stagnation, while looking back, it appears to Ahalya, how traumas detrimentally shaped her inert identity:

> She had made herself invisible to the condemning eyes of society. For years now, she had withstood the blatant speculation, the insinuations, the prurience, and sympathy of all she knew and those whom she did not. She was known as the woman who had cheated and deceived her good husband. And she had no choice but to bear the humiliation and the pity with as much fortitude as she could muster. (Kane, 2019, p. 331-32)

Kane discovers that Ahalya's transformation was largely hindered by repression. She had to refrain from figuring out a healing for her trauma by a variety of institutional, political, and cultural barriers, which also reduced her chances of addressing the legacy of the past. These reflections can be viewed as broad metaphors that explore Ahalya's traumatic pasts and offer an analytical and interpretive framework.

She found herself frozen into stone, not in defence against the insinuations and barbs, but in the hopeful quest that she would seek her sense of peace. It was her symbolic death and the world seem to revel in it. That same world that once revered her as Rishi Gautam's wife, the mother of the ashram. Did it warm the cockles of the heartless society to see a woman subjugated and subjected to a trial of chastity and fidelity? Gautam had claimed he did not hold her guilty, but the world did by the fact that he left her. It was his action that condemned her, as much as her infidelity. He was not condemned for his redemption, she was. (Kane, 2019, p. 332)

A relational picture of the victim's mental and physical time is drawn, with the aforementioned textual instances where "her whole past was re-enacting itself in a range of consciousness" (Kane, 2019, p. 335). Therefore, Memory Studies could be the most useful method for evaluating Ahalya's crises. Using memory to analyse the narrative, which is characterised by introspection, the story documents her evolving sense of self and identity, which is meticulously confirmed by depicting the specifics of her life.

Ahalya develops a far stronger bond with the location's/place's memory since she suffers from both bodily and mental immobility. In Ahalya's case, memory of the ashram summons her past instantly, and as a result, memory gives access to the identification of serious turning points in her life, her stagnation, and other feelings associated with the location. The narration in the third person representation of Ahalya's consciousness creates a bunch of meanings retrospectively through Ahalya's dilemmatic consciousness, which includes a wide range of "metaphors of memory" (Erll, 2011).

Gautam defied Ahalya by casting a curse, designating herself as the 'other' and himself as the 'one'. It is evident that women like Ahalya lack a true history, past, present, or future. They have only ever received; never truly perceived. In other words, they have only been receivers, never been allowed to give. One significant factor being examined in this case is Ahalya's agency. Ahalya lacks a voice and an active role in the epic. She is a traumatised victim of popular

prejudices, a passive bearer of societal suspicions. She is also a poor, silent witness to her own tragedy, unable to talk, think, or act. In terms of socio-cultural frameworks, the narrative arc focuses on Ahalya's memory becoming relational. The careful act of remembering her entire life events in the final chapter demonstrates how society and culture subjugated others while privileging a select few. Thus, it is relevant that she remembers her past to change the conflict and stagnation that currently surrounds her.

The paradox in the inextricable relation between Ahalya and Gautam is fully perceived by her after she revisits through memories her active past which she has personally lived. Sharing a home with the wise Gautam was like floating down a river without any currents or whirlpools. She was unable to detect any luminous torrents or overflow. Her surroundings at Gautam's ashram were subdued, gloomy, and less cheerful. Kane critically questions Ahalya's transition from an aspirational young woman to a housewife who sacrifices her time and potential to raise her children. Kane conscientiously adopts an observational approach as she assesses Gautam's air of authority. Because Gautam is extremely competitive, he makes independent decisions and finds time to learn. He oversees his, Ahalya's, and their kids' environment. He is a self-possessed person who is sovereign, free, and in control of everything around him. Gautam holds himself accountable for upholding both his wife's and the ashram's moral standards. Her realisations and the hazy memories grew increasingly distinct as she skimmed further back. This is symptomatic of the irreplaceable importance of memory in helping her recognise her own identity and the true nature of those around her, especially her spouse. Ahalya recalled how he left her hoping that she would find her own enlightenment there. It was his action that condemned her. "Her transgression came because of a man, her retribution too from a man" (Kane, 2019, p. 335), whom she envisioned through her idealised dreams of adoration, aspiring to a new life of equality and understanding upon their marriage.

Ahalya on the other hand, is seen as a transgressor within the maze of morality and social order. She betrayed both Gautam's and the Ashram's honour. The way Gautam feels about Ahalya is an

example of how toxic some cultural ideals can be. Gautam's male ego makes him take the law into his own hands and never acknowledges Ahalya's feelings. Ahalya's marginalisation makes her question her own existence as she lived in an incredibly pitiful condition of deprivation. She begins to see the world both from the outside and the inside. In her pre-traumatic phase of life, Ahalya had believed in the existence of a world where husband and wife have equal rights and privileges. But her post-traumatic experience upsets this belief and made her realize the existence of a central as well as a peripheral space, wherein, a woman like her is invariably dumped to the periphery. This realisation becomes a source of her existential turmoil. At this point, memory becomes the definitive boundary delineating the pre-traumatic and post-traumatic phases and an apparent articulation of her psychology rooted in her lived experience. Kane is successful in contrasting the debate regarding Ahalya's own perception of her past and present with the widely held belief about Ahalya and her personal memories.

Life was a long struggle for acceptance and survival for her. Ahalya's truth is bound up with the crisis of the truth itself, which constitutes the central enigma of her survival. What she knows to be the truth of her life is not the truth as perceived by others and she is pitifully incapable of communicating her knowledge of the truth, thereby endangering her own existence. Her recall of the events makes possible an insight into her own trauma, foregrounding the "past–present link" (Kattago, 2015, p. 8) further clarifying Caruth's (1995) presupposition that "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time" (p. 9), manifesting the manifold ways in which past, present and future interact. This deeply disturbing observation of the belatedness in fathoming the depths of her own trauma propounds not only the brutality of the event, but also the difficulty of her survival itself in the socio-cultural milieu.

Every disturbing traumatic incident, in the Freudian observation evinces a "fundamental dislocation" (Caruth, 1995, p. 9). That Ahalya had to re-evaluate trauma through her memories, throws light on her psychological misalignment and the immediate inaccessibility she had

to her own trauma and the resistance she had developed against its impact. However, the narrative explicitly opens perspectives on the ways in which trauma accessed through memories makes resilience possible, where the ultimate outcome is survival. It is quite startling to notice that the repeated revival of the traumatic incidents and their emotional reconstruction are essential to the full resolution of the traumatic experience. When such painful/unpleasant memories are resurrected with vigor and energy in the clear light of the day, they can transcend the victim's suffering rather than just being suppressed. Trauma eventually gives place to remembrance which acts as a coping mechanism. This proves that "since memories are fluid/malleable, they change over time, what is remembered can possibly follow different paths, trajectories and vectors" (Kattago, 2015, p. 6). In the case of Ahalya, remembrance was cathartic, facilitating metamorphosis. Finally, this also vindicates how remembrance and forgetting act as two decisive steps in the process of catharsis.

Though a victim of oppression, Ahalya transforms heavily at the end of the narrative. At one point the protagonist surveys her own journey over the years:

> The wheels of her life were still whirring slowly in her state of oblivion, her comatose mind experiencing the complete whole, the full turn of the wheel of experience and events. If life was meant to be an accretion of extreme forces and feelings working together, was her insatiable desire just a bridge to cross from ignorance to knowledge? Connecting the good with bad, the just with the unfair, beauty with ugliness, faith with deceit, hope with disappointment, trust with betrayal, the sheltered, reverent life of ashram with the exposed life of disgrace and humiliation. From the palace to the hut, from princess to a rishika, she thought she had travelled across boundaries, but she had now crossed that one line she thought she would never pass. Her righteousness was a lie, her transgression her new truth (Kane, 2019, p. 334).

Against all odds, Ahalya awakens and rises from the ashes. The period when she stood as a frozen stone was de facto a time of wakefulness. It helped her realize the trap of male/female binaries

and finally to resolve her dilemma and to fly beyond. Her character is paraded and contrasted against the model of a man with 'desirable' manhood. Gautam is satirised as one of the greatest Indian stereotypes of masculinity trapped in its toxicity. Ahalya in Kane's narrative is a woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional/ patriarchal man. In her stony existence, Ahalya found peace and space to understand her won neglected self. She could answer all her questions and clarify all her doubts. Ahalya becomes that universal woman-subject who carves her own meanings out of her encounter with injustice. The metamorphosed Ahalya is capable of awakening women to emancipation, to their true senses. Her submissiveness disappears into oblivion. In the multiplication of the wakefulness, she realizes that she had remained the victim of cruel social conventions. Busy among the daily chores, Ahalya had forgotten to live her life and desires to fruition. In the strong blow of realisation, she soon comprehended that she had been manipulated by two men. Exploited by Gautam and Indra, Ahalya was ruthlessly separated from the world. Her mind, home and heart were empty, so was her love.

When the story nears the climax, she thwarts the attempts to reduce her life to a stony existence-roughened and darkened by the forces of nature, devoid of light, goodness, and meanings. It is symbolic that though Gautam and Indra are two different men, they appear in the same physical form to Ahalya. It is her inability to distinguish between them that invites the trauma on her. Her trauma teaches her that the two men are the same in their patriarchy in spite of them being two different individuals. This ironical situation suggests the universal nature of patriarchy that operates at different levels to traumatise women in different ways. Ahalya's doubts on the topics-war, love, education of women, marriage which she asks Gautam at the beginning of the novel are in effect the questions against the construction of desirable masculinities and less desirable femininities. It shows how far these epics have played a fatal role in fabricating and strengthening the binaries, the criteria to gauge masculinities, femininities and in further complicating the gender relations and their cultural interpretations.

In spite of the enormity of the repression she had undergone, Ahalya strikes everyone with the infinite richness of her individual constitution. Ahalya's recovery and rumination were meant to liberate her. Her look back to the stigmatised past rather causes a sharp revival of memory, which sets off resilience and metamorphosis. De-traumatisation occurs explicitly, and a coping mechanism is eventually developed as an outcome. Reincarnated, she gets in possession of her own destiny, draws attention to the potentiality of her own body. Therefore, Ahalya's character has a sort of psychological depth and is genuinely intriguing. Kavita Kane's narrative successfully places her in a space where she transcends her fate. It is therefore possible to conclude that the select narrative of Kavita Kane is a clear instance where trauma and its memory duly intersect, paving the way for personal metamorphosis.

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Arya. N

University JRF Research Scholar

Postgraduate and Research Department of English

St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry

Pin: 689641

India

Email: aryan2020r@stthomascollege.info

Ph: +91 7356435408

ORCID: 0009-0003-8333-3096

&

Dr. Teena Rachel Thomas

Assistant Professor and Research Supervisor

Postgraduate and Research Department of English

St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry

Pin: 689641

India

Email: tinathomasrachel@gmail.com

Ph: +91 9778204618

ORCID: 0009-0005-4213-4183