
Bifurcation of Consciousness in Kavita Kane's novel *Ahalya 's Awakening*

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ABSTRACT

This paper throws light on woman consciousness bifurcated by male chauvinism, religious injunctions and social conventions. The world of woman splits into two when she becomes a mother. The whole dominant male society perceives woman as an object of physical pleasure and expects her to confine to the role of a mother. She struggles to create an identity of her own and she will be obliged to sacrifice her dream and adapt herself to the dominant view. Dorothy E.Smith, a British born Canadian Feminist, has coined a term called "Bifurcation of Consciousness" from her own life experiences which is related to the Standpoint Theory. In this, she refers to the separation of women's two modes of being. She describes about the split between the world that a woman actually experiences and the dominant view which she is supposed to adapt. A woman must strive hard to push past their expected role as housewives and mothers, moving from the local realm of the home to the extra local realm of society, which induces them to the split their consciousness into two in order to establish themselves as an competent individuals with an identity of their own. Kavita Kane, in her provoking novel *Ahalya 's Awakening*, portrays how she aspires to become a rishika and later confines to be a mother to her children because of negligence and domination of her husband Rishi Gautam.

KEYWORDS: Bifurcation, Domination, Split, Identity, Patriarchy, Consciousness

INTRODUCTION

Woman's psyche is often projected as inferior because of patriarchal notions prevailing in our society. A woman has to be free from stereotypical images so as to attain self-fulfillment and self-realization. The publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792 and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* in 1869 argue that women should be treated equally in the society. The American feminists Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow conclude that women differ from men in our society not because of the fact that their psyches are innately different, but because they are raised by their mothers to conform to a specific image of 'woman' that pervades in society. Even American Feminist Judith Butler, in her famous work *Gender Trouble* published in 1990, defines that the identity of 'woman' is a fiction. Woman exists because she acts in accordance with this identity. There is no essence of 'woman' beyond the acts that constitute gender identity. Therefore a woman is shaped by social meanings and produced by the actions that constitute gender. Woman is identified as irrational and emotional being and therefore occupies an inferior role in the society.

Dorothy Smith, a British born Canadian ethnographer and an active feminist coined a term called "Bifurcation of Consciousness". The word 'Bifurcation' means dividing or separating into two parts. Smith argues that there is a split within the world that an individual woman actually experiences and the dominant view that one is supposed to adapt, especially the male-oriented view. This refers to the separation of women's two modes of being. Since this society is a male-centric one, women must fight to push past their expected roles as housewives

and mothers, moving from the local realm of the home to the "extra local" realm of society. Women, therefore, split their consciousness into two in order to establish themselves as knowledgeable and competent beings within the society and in the field of sociology. Kane, in this novel, pictures how Ahalya's consciousness and her world are divided into two for being born as a woman and obliged to be just a mother to her children by the dominant male society than being a rishika, which she aspires to become.

In her heart-wrenching story *Ahalya's Awakening*, Kane depicts how she has been incarnated by Lord Brahma as a beautiful girl and always meant for someone special especially for Indra, King of Gods by her mother Nalayani of Panchal. Her tutor, Rishi Vashisht named her as Ahalya, which symbolizes divine beauty without blemishes. Everyone admires her for her bewitching beauty but she decides to create an identity of her own using her intellect. Ahalya's thirst for knowledge, brilliance and her incessant queries have made her tutor to awe but her parents are fascinated by her beauty than her intellect. Ahalya's flair for grasping and mastering her lessons and her argument with her guru Vashisht is expressed through her desperate words, "I have to know! why is it that a prince is taught archery and not a princess?"(13) proves her curiosity to learn despite gender discrimination. Even at her age of sixteen, she worries about her achievements in future. The male oriented society and her own parents view Ahalya as a woman of surpassing beauty and expect her to get married. But she always considers her beauty as a natural gift from God and determines to create an identity of her own. Moreover, she does not want to be a mere object of pleasure. Her innate spirit of enquiry and inquisitiveness are never acknowledged by her own parents. Her stubbornness to pursue higher studies at Ashram has been a matter of debate as her mother is not willing to send her to ashram as it is only meant for men. Ahalya's thirst for knowledge is evident in her confession, "An ashram is meant for higher learning and I can't remain in the palace. I don't want to be some cloistered princess who just looks pretty and does nothing! I want to study" (22).

Kane portrays that the discrimination begins from a mother and it is evident through Nalayani's words, "No, If you want to study further, it will be here in this palace only"(22). Nalayani wants her daughter to marry Indra as he is an ally and a friend to Ahalya's twin brother Divodas. But Ahalya's obstinate nature to pursue higher studies questions Indra who proposes marriage to her as, "Does marriage always validate a woman? Or her future?"(38). Ahalya wants to be perceived as an individual who can expertise in a respective field than just be a woman intended only for marriage or physical pleasure. This is evident when she questions Indra, "Do you see women just as an objects of beauty and desire and not as women, as people engaged in specific occupations? Women as individuals learned in their respective fields?"(39). When Indra expresses his opinion that women are just lovely creatures, Ahalya expresses her hostility by stating that why women are not identified as an individual of intellect and emotions, capable of choices and opinions. Thus Indra and even her own mother Nalayani neglect her desire for learning and force her into marriage as she is born as a beautiful girl. Kane, through the character of Ahalya, portrays the society's view on a woman as an mere object of pleasure created only to be enjoyed and tamed to be a submissive wife or mother for one's children. Kane, through Ahalya, thus condemns and warns the male-oriented society to look beyond the women's physical beauty, where there is an adorable heart and an aspiring knowledge.

For Ahalya, Ashram is a place of wisdom and she determines to grab every opportunity as it is her war to fight against the restrictions to continue her studies. Her firmness is expressed in her anguish, "I would rather be a scholar"(64). But she is dominated by her parents's view that Ashram is not meant for women and it is a place meant only for men. At last, she is sent to Rishi Gautam ashram to protect herself from the invasion of enemies from Panchal. Her dream ashram becomes her sanctuary, where her thirst for knowledge is quenched by Gautam's tutoring and she expresses her desire that, "I want to be a scholar. I want to enter the bottomless realm of wisdom and knowledge"(86). She argues and protests against the androcentric society, which treats woman as a legal property and forces them to obey without any freedom to choose their path. She begs Rishi Gautam to accept her as his shishya with determination that she will prove herself as a very good student. Later Rishi Gautam too acknowledges that she excels in all subjects and she is on her way of becoming a rishika soon. Meanwhile, she falls in love with Rishi Gautam and finally marries him against her mother's opposition with an anticipation that her husband will tutor her to become a rishika. Her urge to read scriptures has induced her to finish all her household chores and join the classes on Vedanta philosophy tutored by her husband Gautham to his disciples in ashram. Her devotion to her studies provokes her to sit late night to read and memorise hymns. She never misses a class or a chance to pore over her books. Her determination is expressed through her words, "No, I won't compromise on my studies"(189). When one of the ashram disciples, Uttank questions Ahalya how she manages

everything, she replies, “That is a woman’s special ability : to perform more than one task”(227). But after becoming a mother of four children, her world splits into two.

Smith also argues that a woman’s world splits into two when she becomes a mother. The whole dominant society views her only as a mother and she must adapt to that and she is also forced to neglect her dreams and aspirations of creating an identity of her own. Ahalya, inspite of all household chores like taking care of ashram kids, cooking, looking after her children, she always find time to read. Her dream of becoming a rishika triggers her to request her husband Gautam to tutor her. Ahalya expresses her distress and disappointment through her words, “You had promised we would begin with the sama veda soon, I have taken out time to study all that I missed last week. I am lagging behind in my studies”(245). But Gautam always expresses his impatience that he has no time to tutor her as he is busy with new batch of students and declares that she has to take rest as she looks tired of doing all ashram works. He expresses his negligence, “I don’t have time and you require the rest now that there are four children to look after”(245). These words create a havoc in Ahalya’s heart as she marries Rishi Gautam not only out of love but also with a hope that she can pursue her dream of becoming a rishika. Ahalya has been viewed as a woman with exquisite beauty but not as an individual with her own ambitions. When Ahalya’s incessant request to tutor her has been neglected by Gautam, she feels a breach of trust. During the visit to her mother’s home for her twin brother Divodas’ wedding, Ahalya is ridiculed and mocked by her own mother and brother for not accomplishing her dream of becoming rishika instead, helping Gautam in running the ashram. Her mother’s anguish is evident in following lines, “I suspect that you only married him as an escape, a means to become a rishika. But did you become one?”(256). Ahalya’s dream shatters and her husband Gautam points out her motherliness as an excuse to stay away from teaching her and it becomes a barrier for her aspiration. As Dorothy E. Smith mentions in her concept that this society being a male dominant, a woman must fight to push past her anticipated role as housewife and mother and thereby proves herself as an individual with her own identity. Despite Ahalya’s continuous struggle to maintain equilibrium between her role of a wife of rishi and mother, she has lost her ambition of becoming rishika and her selfhood.

Gautam has not only pulverised Ahalya’s desire but also failed to perform his duty as a husband by mentioning his penance as an reason. His constant negligence to Ahalya’s demand of love, prompts Ahalya to question him, “I have been with you all along. But are you with me? You stopped talking, you stopped teaching, you stopped being my friend, you stopped touching me!”(270). “You didn’t make me a scholar either!”(272), She further questions the duty of a husband, “You, as my husband, are supposed to satisfy me just as I am supposed to satiate your needs”(273). Gautam stresses that she has to compromise herself being a rishi’s wife. Atlast Gautam’s indifference fills her with mortification. She recognises her helpless situation and hopeless life that inturn makes her feel burdensome and her desperateness for love and care makes her to fall prey for Indra’s duplicitous act of disguising himself as rishi Gautam and procure Ahalya. Her moment of vulnerability has made her to lose herself, her family and cursed by her husband Rishi Gautam. Atlast Gautam accepts that how this male dominated society restrains a woman from achieving her dream and freedom. Gautam expresses his guilt, “Man believes he is free to do what he wants. Not so a woman. She is not allowed to be free. Like other men, I treated you not as a wife but as most men treat most women: I thwarted you, made you inert and compliant, restricted you to home-keeping and legal subordination.”(324). Thus Kane concludes with acquiesce view of Dorothy E. Smith that a woman must fight to achieve her dream despite the fact that the dominant view of society always perceives her an object of pleasure and a symbol of motherhood than an individual with their own dreams and compelling her to adapt to this view.

CONCLUSION

A woman is always bound by her duties and responsibility. She is marginalized and her consciousness is often split by the affluence of her family and vicious social conventions. Her subjection lies as a result of weakness

caused by childbearing and becomes a dependent soul on men for survival. Betty Friedan, a Liberal Feminist, in her work *Feminine Mystique* published in the year 1963, argues that women should seek political and legal equality and this would remove the inferior status in the society. The fact that women bear children and are responsible for raising them does not mean to be placed in subordinate position. They are usually viewed as housewives and symbol of motherhood and are not meant to attain individualism of their own. Motherhood should be identified as distinctive contribution of women and it should not be a source of oppression and she must not accept things as they are and must challenge her endeavour to express the feminine spirit. Responsibility lies heavy on the patriarchal wife who sacrifices even her dreams that are often remain unnoticed. A woman's position within the society should not be simply regarded as domestic housewife living dependent on male counterparts. They are to be treated as the companions and they deserve equal education and integrity that benefits everyone in the society. To conclude with the words of the British feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, "Men and women should be educated on equal model and this share dynamic equality between man and woman will achieve true virtue and morality in the society".

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