

From Stone to Woman and Woman Back to Stone: Myth, Memory, Female Subjectivity, and the Paradox of Redemption in Bipin Nayak's "Ahalyā"

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Abstract: *Bipin Nayak's "Ahalyā," collected in his Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award-winning poetry anthology Swarachitra, is a remarkably compressed modern reconfiguration of one of the most enduring female figures of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition. Rather than retelling the familiar narrative of Ahalyā's curse and liberation, Nayak extracts from the myth a series of paradoxical transformations through which stone, woman, love, innocence, history, nature, marriage, and memory become mutually implicated. The poem begins by distinguishing between touching with the hand and touching with the foot—"This / is not a matter / of touching with the hand, / but of touching with the foot"—and its Odia counterpart, "Ie / Hāta nuhen / Pādare chhuinbāra kathā," immediately foregrounds the corporeal and hierarchical dimensions of the myth. The poem then performs its decisive reversal: the stone once transformed into a woman "has turned into stone again," corresponding to "Hele jeun patharaṭi dine / Pālāti thilā nārī / Iti madhyare se puni / Pālāti galāṇi pathara". This return to stone radically unsettles the conventional teleology of divine redemption. The article argues that Nayak transforms the Ahalyā myth from a narrative of miraculous liberation into a meditation on the instability and incompleteness of liberation itself. Drawing upon feminist criticism, myth criticism, post-structuralism, theories of the male gaze, reader-response, intertextuality, and philosophical approaches to identity and becoming, the study examines Ahalyā as a figure of female subjectivity repeatedly constituted by external forces. Particular attention is given to the poem's final images of moss and vermilion—"sometimes moss / on her body, / sometimes / vermilion on her forehead"—which establish a profound dialectic between natural inscription and social inscription. Comparative readings of modern revisions of Ahalyā and related mythic female figures, including works associated with Pudhumaipithan, S. Sivasekaram, K. B. Sreedevi, Carol Ann Duffy, Rita Dove, and the wider tradition of revisionist mythmaking, demonstrate the distinctive character of Nayak's intervention. The study concludes that "Ahalyā" is not simply a feminist retelling or an anti-mythic poem but a philosophically charged meditation on the relationship among body, identity, memory, history, and agency. Its ultimate paradox is that Ahalyā is liberated from stone only to reveal how easily womanhood itself can become another form of petrification.*

Keywords: *Swarachitra, Rāmāyaṇa, myth revision, feminist criticism, female subjectivity, petrification, redemption, intertextuality.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Modern poetry frequently returns to ancient myths not because the myths have become irrelevant but because they remain disturbingly relevant. Myth survives precisely because its characters and structures continue to accommodate new historical meanings. When a modern poet revisits an epic figure, the poet is not merely looking backward. The act of revisiting becomes a way of looking at the present through the mirror of the past. The ancient narrative becomes a cultural language through which contemporary anxieties concerning gender, power, identity, sexuality, morality, memory, violence, and freedom can be articulated. Bipin Nayak's "Ahalyā" belongs decisively to this tradition of modern mythic revision. The poem does not reproduce the Ahalyā episode as an epic miniature; rather, it takes the cultural memory of Ahalyā and subjects it to a radically compressed poetic interrogation.

Ahalyā is among the most complex women in the Rāmāyaṇa tradition because her identity has never been entirely stable. Across textual and oral traditions, she has appeared as an idealized woman, a beautiful wife, a transgressive woman, a deceived woman, a victim, a sinner, an innocent, a cursed figure, a stone, and a woman restored by Rama. Her story therefore possesses an extraordinary capacity for reinterpretation. The myth itself contains questions that modern literature cannot ignore: Who possesses the authority to define female purity? Who determines guilt? What constitutes consent? What happens to a woman after public or divine judgment? Does redemption restore agency? Can a woman escape an identity imposed upon her? And, perhaps most importantly, can a transformation bestowed from outside become genuine liberation?

Nayak's poem asks these questions without stating them abstractly. Instead, it converts them into a sequence of material images. The poem begins with touch, proceeds through stone and womanhood, introduces historical

movement through the image of archers crossing the Ganges, and concludes with moss and vermillion. The extraordinary economy of the poem derives from the fact that each of these images carries an extensive cultural history. The reader is not given a complete narrative because the poem assumes the epic narrative as a silent background. Its modernity consequently depends upon cultural memory.

The central thesis of this study is that “*Ahalyā*” transforms the conventional narrative structure of curse → redemption into a more unsettling sequence of petrification → animation → re-petrification. The transformation of stone into woman no longer constitutes the unquestionable climax of the story. Instead, the poem asks what becomes of the woman after the miracle. Its answer is devastatingly concise: she becomes stone again. The poem thereby changes redemption from a conclusion into a temporary interruption.

This reversal gives “*Ahalyā*” an unusual philosophical depth. The poem does not simply criticize patriarchal mythology, nor does it merely celebrate female innocence. Its deeper concern is with the instability of identity itself. *Ahalyā* is repeatedly defined through external actions and signs: she is touched, cursed, transformed, remembered, marked, and narrated. Her own autonomous voice is conspicuously absent. The poem therefore creates a paradoxical situation in which *Ahalyā* becomes visible through the poem while remaining silent within it.

The final image intensifies this problem. “Sometimes moss / on her body, / sometimes / vermillion on her forehead” (Nayak 450). The Odia—“*Kebe tāra dihare śiuli ta / Kebe tā'ra / Mathāre sindūra*”—is equally striking in its compactness (Nayak 450). Moss and sindoor belong to radically different symbolic domains, yet both are external signs placed upon the female body. Moss identifies the stone; vermillion identifies the married woman. Between these two inscriptions stands *Ahalyā*. The poem thus raises the possibility that the woman who escapes one form of objectification may enter another.

This study therefore approaches “*Ahalyā*” simultaneously as a poem of mythic revision, feminist inquiry, philosophical paradox, symbolic condensation, and modern Odia poetic experimentation. The purpose is not to force the poem into a single theoretical category but to demonstrate how several interpretive frameworks illuminate different dimensions of its complexity.

II. TEXT, CONTEXT, AND THE AHALYĀ TRADITION

Any interpretation of Nayak’s “*Ahalyā*” must begin by acknowledging the multiplicity of the *Ahalyā* tradition. The familiar popular narrative tells of *Ahalyā*, wife of the sage Gautama, who is deceived by Indra and subsequently cursed. Rama later encounters her and, through contact with her, restores her to human existence. The popular image of the woman becoming stone and subsequently returning to human form has become so deeply embedded in cultural consciousness that “*Ahalyā*” and “stone” are almost inseparable in modern popular imagination.

Yet the textual history is more complicated. The early Sanskrit account in the *Bālakāṇḍa* of Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* does not necessarily present the exact material petrification familiar from later retellings. The image of *Ahalyā* literally becoming stone develops and acquires greater prominence through later narrative traditions, vernacular retellings, devotional literature, oral traditions, and popular culture. This distinction matters because Nayak’s poem clearly operates within the culturally dominant image rather than attempting to reproduce one supposedly original version of the story.

The poet’s *Ahalyā* is therefore an intertextual *Ahalyā*. She is constructed from centuries of accumulated representations. The reader encounters not only Vālmīki’s *Ahalyā* but also the *Ahalyā* of later Sanskrit traditions, regional Ramayanas, devotional imagination, folk narrative, modern fiction, theatre, painting, cinema, and poetry. In Gérard Genette’s terminology, the poem functions through a complex relationship with prior texts and cultural narratives; it is a new textual layer written upon an already densely inscribed mythic surface (Genette).

This intertextuality is essential to Nayak’s method. Because the poem is extremely short, much of its meaning exists outside the literal words. “Many archers / have crossed the Ganges” (Nayak 450) would be cryptic if read without knowledge of the epic context. Within the cultural memory of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, however, the archer immediately evokes Rama. Yet Nayak does not write simply “Rama.” He writes “many archers.” This transformation from singular hero to plural historical figure is one of the poem’s most significant departures from epic narration.

The plural “archers” converts the mythic event into a historical pattern. Rama is no longer simply the unique divine hero whose arrival ends *Ahalyā*’s curse. He becomes part of a continuing succession of masculine movement through history. The Ganges continues to be crossed; the world continues to move; generations pass. Yet the woman who was transformed remains vulnerable to another transformation into stone. The poem thus changes the temporal structure of myth. Traditional myth often presents a decisive event whose consequences are final. Nayak instead creates an open temporal field. “Since that day” (Nayak 450) means that the poem’s present exists after the mythic event. The crucial question is therefore not what happened then but what has happened since then. The answer is contained in the final transformation. The stone returned. The woman did not remain liberated. The myth therefore becomes a metaphor for historical recurrence.

III. AHALYĀ AS A MYTHIC PALIMPSEST

Bipin Nayak’s “*Ahalyā*,” collected in *Swarachitra*, an Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award-winning poetry anthology, is a poem whose apparent simplicity conceals an extraordinary density of cultural memory. Its textual surface is small, but its intertextual field is vast. The poem enters a narrative that has circulated for centuries through Sanskrit epic, Purāṇic

elaboration, vernacular Ramayanas, oral traditions, devotional narratives, theatrical performances, visual representations, modern fiction, and contemporary poetry. Ahalyā is therefore never merely the woman whom Nayak names in his title. Before the poem begins, she has already been narrated, interpreted, condemned, defended, sanctified, eroticized, moralized, petrified, liberated, and remembered. Nayak's poetic achievement lies in entering this already crowded field without reproducing its inherited certainties. His poem does not seek to tell the story again; rather, it isolates a few symbolic residues of the story and makes them strange. In this sense, "*Ahalyā*" is a palimpsest: beneath the contemporary poem remain the traces of earlier versions, but the new writing partially obscures, partially reveals, and decisively rearranges those earlier meanings.

The cultural history of Ahalyā is itself marked by textual plurality. The Valmiki *Rāmāyana* does not present exactly the same literal stone narrative that became dominant in later popular imagination. In the *Bālakāṇḍa*, Ahalyā is associated with Gautama's curse and with a condition of invisibility or imperceptibility until Rama arrives. Later retellings intensify the material image of petrification, eventually producing the familiar cultural picture of the woman transformed into stone and restored by Rama's touch. This distinction is crucial to Nayak's poem because it shows that the poet is not attempting a philological reconstruction of one canonical episode. He is working with the sedimented cultural memory of Ahalyā as stone. The stone is therefore not simply a narrative detail; it is a cultural symbol that has accumulated centuries of interpretive meaning.

The poem's modernity becomes visible precisely in this choice. Nayak does not ask which version of Ahalyā is historically authentic. He asks what the accumulated image of Ahalyā-as-stone means for the modern imagination. The stone becomes a metaphor capable of carrying several simultaneous meanings: punishment, silence, immobility, objectification, endurance, memory, death, survival, and the denial of agency. The woman becomes the site upon which these meanings intersect. Such a strategy is characteristic of modern mythic poetry, in which the inherited myth is not discarded but subjected to critical re-reading. Myth becomes less a story about the past than a language through which the present can interrogate itself.

The poem's most important intervention is consequently not the introduction of a new event but the transformation of the meaning of an old one. Rama's touch is traditionally understood as the moment of release. Nayak does not deny that transformation, but he refuses to allow it to remain the final meaning of the story. The woman who emerges from stone does not remain permanently liberated. The stone eventually returns. The result is a radical disturbance of the traditional narrative of redemption. The reader is compelled to move beyond the familiar question—how was Ahalyā redeemed?—toward a much more troubling question: what

kind of redemption is it if the redeemed woman eventually becomes stone again?

This question gives the poem its distinctive philosophical architecture. The poem is therefore neither a simple feminist denunciation of patriarchal culture nor a devotional celebration of Rama. It occupies a more difficult middle ground in which the symbolic value of redemption itself becomes unstable. Nayak's Ahalyā is caught between the miracle of transformation and the persistence of the condition that made transformation necessary. The poem thus converts mythology into an inquiry into the durability of liberation.

IV. THE FIRST GREAT PARADOX: STONE BECOMES WOMAN

The poem begins with an apparent correction of the familiar narrative: "This / is not a matter / of touching with the hand, / but of touching with the foot" (Nayak 450). The corresponding Odia transliteration, "*Ie / Hāta nuhen / Pādare chhuinbāra kathā,*" is even more economical (Nayak 450). The opening is important because Nayak does not begin with Ahalyā's name, her curse, Gautama, Indra, or Rama. He begins with the physical act of touching. The myth is therefore immediately converted from a religious narrative into a phenomenological event. The reader is asked to think about the body that touches, the body that is touched, and the physical asymmetry between the two.

The opposition between *hāta* and *pāda*, hand and foot, is particularly significant. The hand usually signifies human agency, intimacy, tenderness, creativity, protection, and conscious action. The foot, by contrast, carries the body's weight and occupies a different symbolic position. It stands above what lies beneath it. In the context of the stone narrative, this distinction becomes inseparable from hierarchy. Ahalyā is below; Rama is above. One acts; the other receives the action. One body touches; another body undergoes transformation. The miracle is therefore materially asymmetrical.

This does not mean that Nayak reduces Rama to an oppressive figure. Such an interpretation would be unnecessarily reductive and would ignore the poem's subtlety. Rather, the poet makes visible a physical fact that devotional readings may transform into a purely sacred abstraction. The foot becomes the instrument of grace, but it is simultaneously the organ of bodily hierarchy. The poem allows both meanings to coexist. Its modernity lies in this double vision. It can recognize the sacred resonance of Rama's foot while also making the reader conscious of the gendered and corporeal politics embedded in the gesture.

The transformation that follows is equally paradoxical. The English translation renders the phrase as "a matter of turning into stone / in love" (Nayak 450), corresponding to the Odia "*Pathara pālāti jāibāra kathā / Premare*" (Nayak 450). The phrase "in love" is startling because it connects an emotion ordinarily associated with warmth and animation with the image of petrification. Love becomes a condition of becoming stone. The oxymoronic force is unmistakable. Love should

animate; stone immobilizes. Love should generate intimacy; stone creates separation. Love should make one more fully human; petrification removes mobility and speech. The phrase can consequently be read as a critique of the romanticization of female suffering. If love requires the woman to surrender her independent subjectivity, then love can become a form of petrification. If the social order interprets female sexuality through the language of purity and possession, then love itself becomes dangerous. The poem refuses to sentimentalize the myth. Instead, it places love and stonehood within the same semantic field and asks whether the cultural ideal of feminine love can sometimes become indistinguishable from self-erasure. The phrase “immaculate living / of the woman” intensifies this ambiguity. The Odia “*Niṣpāpa jāimbāra kathā / Nārītira*” places the emphasis upon the woman’s innocence or sinlessness (Nayak 450). Yet innocence in the Ahalyā tradition is never simply a private psychological condition. It is socially judged. The woman’s purity is constructed through codes that are often controlled by institutions external to her. Thus the poem quietly exposes one of patriarchy’s central contradictions: the woman is expected to remain “immaculate,” but the authority to define immaculateness does not necessarily belong to the woman herself. The result is a profound irony. Ahalyā must become pure in order to become fully acceptable, yet her body is precisely what becomes the object of judgment. Her identity is therefore constructed through a moral vocabulary imposed upon her from outside. The poem’s use of “woman” rather than simply repeating “*Ahalyā*” universalizes the problem. Ahalyā becomes more than a mythological individual. She becomes a figure through whom the poem reflects upon the historical condition of women whose bodies have been made the site of moral surveillance.

V. THE FEMALE BODY AS A SITE OF CULTURAL INSCRIPTION

The central achievement of “*Ahalyā*” becomes increasingly visible when the poem is read as a meditation on the female body. The body is not simply biological matter in Nayak’s imagination. It is a surface upon which meanings are written. It can be cursed, touched, transformed, judged, covered, marked, remembered, and symbolically possessed. The woman’s body therefore functions as an archive of cultural power. This is most evident in the concluding image of the poem: “Only this much: / sometimes moss / on her body, / sometimes / vermilion on her forehead” (Nayak 450). The corresponding Odia—“*Khāli etiki / Kebe tāra dihare śiuli ta / Kebe tā’ra / Mathāre sindūra*”—contains an extraordinary symbolic compression (Nayak 450). The poem ends not with Rama, not with Gautama, not with Indra, and not even with Ahalyā speaking. It ends with two substances placed upon the female body: moss and sindoor. Moss and vermilion appear radically different. Moss belongs to nature; vermilion belongs to culture. Moss is associated with stone, dampness, time, decay, and unattended existence. Vermilion is associated with marriage, domesticity, feminine identity, and social recognition. Yet their structural function in the poem is

surprisingly similar. Both are external marks. Both tell the reader what the body has become within a particular symbolic system. Moss says that the body is stone. Vermilion says that the body is a married woman. Neither mark tells us who Ahalyā is in her own subjectivity.

This is perhaps the most original symbolic insight in the poem. The final opposition is not simply between stone and woman. It is between two kinds of inscription. Nature inscribes the stone through moss; society inscribes the woman through vermilion. In both cases, identity is externally produced. Ahalyā remains enclosed within systems of meaning that precede her. The image therefore lends itself to feminist theoretical interpretation. Simone de Beauvoir’s account of woman as historically constituted as “Other” provides a useful conceptual vocabulary here. Woman is not simply allowed to exist as an autonomous subject; she is defined relationally through structures of masculinity, marriage, sexuality, morality, and social expectation (Beauvoir). Nayak’s Ahalyā embodies precisely such relational construction. She is wife, woman, sinner, victim, stone, redeemed figure, and again stone. Each identity comes from a discourse larger than herself.

Judith Butler’s understanding of gender as constituted through repeated social practices is also illuminating, though it must be applied carefully. Nayak’s poem does not explicitly theorize gender performativity, yet its symbolism reveals how femininity can be marked and reiterated through cultural signs. Sindoor is not merely an ornament. It signifies a socially legible position. It tells the world that the woman belongs to a particular relational category. In this sense, the forehead becomes a site where social identity is materially performed. The poem’s final juxtaposition is therefore more complex than a simple feminist opposition between oppression and liberation. Even the “woman” state is shown as potentially constructed through external signs. The stone is not free because moss covers it; the woman is not necessarily free because vermilion marks her. The poem consequently refuses to equate social visibility with subjectivity.

VI. THE SECOND GREAT PARADOX: WOMAN BECOMES STONE AGAIN

The poem’s central conceptual reversal occurs in the lines: “the stone which, one day, / had turned into a woman— / by now, / has turned into stone again” (Nayak 450). The Odia formulation is: “*Hele jeun patharaṭi dine / Pālāti thilā nārī / Iti madhyare se puni / Pālāti galāṇi pathara*” (Nayak 450). This is the point at which Nayak’s poem decisively separates itself from the conventional redemption narrative. The familiar structure of the story can be represented as woman → stone → woman. Nayak reverses the perspective and gives us stone → woman → stone. The first sequence culminates in liberation; the second culminates in recurrence. The distinction is not merely formal. It changes the philosophical meaning of the myth.

In the traditional narrative, Rama’s arrival completes the story. In Nayak, Rama’s arrival becomes only one moment in

a much longer historical process. The poet asks what happens after the miracle. The answer is that the miracle does not permanently alter the condition of Ahalyā. She becomes stone again. This creates what may be called the poem's **paradox of reversible liberation**. Liberation occurs, but it is not irreversible. The woman emerges from objecthood only to return to objecthood. The miracle is real, but its permanence is denied. The event has happened, yet its consequences are unstable. This structure resembles modern understandings of trauma, in which the ending of an external event does not necessarily terminate its psychological or social effects. The curse may end, but the condition produced by the curse may survive in altered form. Nayak does not narrate psychological trauma explicitly. Instead, he gives us a geological metaphor. Stone becomes a way of representing the persistence of an experience beyond the moment that supposedly ended it.

The phrase "by now" is therefore extraordinarily important. It introduces historical duration. Ahalyā's condition is not instantaneous. Something has happened between the first transformation and the second. Generations have passed. "Many archers / have crossed the Ganges" (Nayak 450). The world has continued moving. Ahalyā has not. The image of the archers is particularly suggestive because it evokes Rama without repeatedly naming him. The plural "archers" also expands the myth into history. Rama becomes one among many figures who have crossed the river, one moment within a long succession of human movement. The Ganges continues to flow; warriors continue to cross; civilizations continue to change. Ahalyā, however, remains symbolically immobilized. The contrast between movement and immobility becomes one of the poem's most powerful temporal structures. The river flows. The archers cross. History proceeds. Ahalyā returns to stone. The poem thereby transforms female petrification into a metaphor for historical repetition: while external history changes, certain structures of gendered existence may remain remarkably persistent.

VII. THE GANGES, THE ARCHERS, AND THE PASSAGE OF HISTORY

The Ganges in the poem should not be reduced to geographical background. It functions as a symbolic river of time, memory, civilization, and cultural continuity. "Since that day, / many archers / have crossed the Ganges" (Nayak 450). The phrase "since that day" creates a temporal distance between the mythic event and the present. The poem is therefore not trapped inside the mythic past. It looks backward from modernity. The Ganges becomes a witness. It has seen generations pass. It has carried warriors, pilgrims, rulers, lovers, refugees, and civilizations. Against this immense movement, Ahalyā's petrification acquires an almost geological scale. The woman becomes the stationary point against which historical movement can be measured. This also allows the poem to move beyond a narrowly individual reading. Ahalyā is not merely a woman who suffered once. She becomes a symbol of recurrent structures. The many archers can be understood as successive historical agents, generations of men, or simply the endless movement

of civilization. Their crossing suggests that the world has not stopped. Yet the poem's final images imply that the fundamental question surrounding the female body remains unresolved.

The pluralization of "archers" is also aesthetically significant. If the poet had written simply "Rama crossed the Ganges," the poem would have remained more tightly bound to the epic event. By saying "many archers," Nayak opens the myth into historical repetition. Rama becomes archetype rather than sole individual. The mythic event becomes a pattern. The poem thereby acquires a distinctly modern historical consciousness. It is asking not merely what happened to Ahalyā in myth but what has happened to women "since that day." The question is implicit rather than declarative, but its force is unmistakable. Centuries have passed, yet the woman remains subject to structures of naming, judging, marking, and objectifying.

VIII. MOSS AS THE SYMBOL OF GEOLOGICAL MEMORY

The image of moss is perhaps the quietest but most powerful symbol in the poem. "Sometimes moss / on her body" (Nayak 450) seems at first to be a simple descriptive image, but its symbolic implications are extensive. Moss requires time. It grows gradually. It suggests moisture, shade, neglect, continuity, and duration. It is nature's inscription upon stone. The poem therefore converts time into a visible substance. Instead of saying that centuries have passed, Nayak shows the reader moss. Instead of narrating the endurance of petrification, he lets nature testify to it. This is a remarkable example of imagistic economy.

Moss also changes the scale of Ahalyā's body. She is no longer merely a human figure. She becomes landscape. Her body becomes stone; stone becomes a surface; the surface becomes a habitat for moss. The human is absorbed into the geological. This transformation gives the poem an ecological dimension that is easy to overlook. At the same time, moss carries associations of neglect. It grows where something has remained undisturbed for a long time. The image therefore suggests that Ahalyā has not simply been preserved; she has been left behind. Her petrification becomes a condition of cultural abandonment. She survives, but survival itself becomes ambiguous. There is thus a paradox of preservation. Stone allows Ahalyā to endure across time, but endurance is purchased at the cost of movement and voice. She survives as an image while losing herself as a subject. The poem consequently asks a question that extends beyond gender: what kind of survival is worth having if survival requires the abandonment of agency?

IX. VERMILION AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF WOMANHOOD

If moss represents natural time and geological memory, vermilion represents social time and cultural identity. "Sometimes / vermilion on her forehead" (Nayak 450) shifts the reader abruptly from stone to marriage. The woman is no longer marked by nature but by society. Sindoor is culturally

charged. It signifies marital status and, within many traditional contexts, the identity of the married woman. In Nayak's poem, however, its placement immediately after moss creates a striking irony. The stone is marked by moss; the woman is marked by vermilion. Both are surfaces bearing signs.

The symbolism should not be interpreted as a rejection of *sindoor* itself. The poem is not making a sociological argument against the cultural practice. Its literary function is more subtle. The vermilion indicates that Ahalyā's identity as woman is also socially coded. The body becomes legible through an external sign. The relationship between moss and *sindoor* therefore produces a conceptual equivalence: both identify the body without giving it a voice. The stone does not choose the moss. The woman does not necessarily control the cultural meaning of the vermilion. The two marks belong to different symbolic worlds, but both participate in the external construction of identity. The ending thus returns us to the poem's central problem: **who has the authority to define Ahalyā?** The myth defines her. The curse defines her. Redemption defines her. Marriage defines her. Nature defines her. But nowhere does the poem allow an unmediated, autonomous Ahalyā to emerge. This is not necessarily a failure of the poem. On the contrary, it may be the poem's deepest formal achievement. By refusing to invent an easy autonomous voice for Ahalyā, Nayak makes the reader experience the very silence that constitutes her predicament.

X. AHALYĀ AND THE POLITICS OF SILENCE

Silence is one of the most important formal characteristics of the poem. Ahalyā never speaks directly. There is no first-person confession, no declaration of innocence, no accusation against Gautama, no protest against Rama, and no explicit statement of desire. Instead, the poem speaks about her. This silence can be read in two contradictory ways. On the one hand, it reproduces the traditional representational structure in which the female figure is narrated by others. On the other hand, the reproduction is deliberate and critical: the poem makes the absence of voice itself visible. The distinction is important. A modern retelling does not necessarily have to give the mythic woman a first-person voice in order to be feminist. Sometimes the absence of voice can be more politically revealing than a fabricated voice of emancipation. Nayak's Ahalyā is trapped within a discourse that has always spoken for her. The poem dramatizes that condition by continuing to speak around her. This recalls Hélène Cixous's argument concerning the historical exclusion of women from authoritative forms of writing and representation. Cixous calls for a mode of writing that allows the female body and female subjectivity to enter discourse rather than remaining objects of masculine representation (875–93). Nayak's poem can be read productively against this framework because it reveals what happens when the female body remains represented but not fully self-representing. The paradox is that the poem itself gives Ahalyā renewed cultural visibility while preserving her silence. She becomes visible precisely through her continued muteness. This makes the poem ethically and aesthetically

complicated. Its feminist force lies not in granting Ahalyā a triumphant voice but in making the reader conscious of the historical conditions that have prevented that voice from emerging.

XI. A FEMINIST READING WITHOUT REDUCING THE POEM TO FEMINISM

Ahalyā's story is particularly suited to feminist criticism because questions of chastity, sexuality, marriage, male authority, punishment, and female reputation are embedded within its cultural history. Yet Nayak's poem should not be reduced to a single feminist thesis. Its philosophical reach exceeds any one theoretical framework. The poem certainly questions patriarchal structures, but it also questions the very idea of stable identity. Ahalyā is stone and woman; redeemed and condemned; visible and silent; natural object and social subject. Her transformations are ontological as well as gendered.

This is where the poem becomes more intellectually interesting than a straightforward feminist retelling. It does not simply reverse the hierarchy by declaring the woman innocent and the male figures guilty. Instead, it makes the categories themselves unstable. Innocence is unstable because it depends upon judgment. Womanhood is unstable because it depends upon social signs. Redemption is unstable because it can be reversed. Stonehood is unstable because the stone can become woman. The poem therefore asks not only whether patriarchy is unjust but also how identity itself is produced through cultural narratives. This makes a post-structuralist reading productive. The sign "*Ahalyā*" does not possess one fixed meaning. It moves among competing signifiers—stone, woman, wife, purity, desire, curse, redemption, moss, vermilion. Each meaning depends upon another. There is no final signified Ahalyā outside the network of representations. The poem's power comes from refusing to close that network.

XII. THE PHILOSOPHY OF BECOMING

The repeated verb of transformation is central to Nayak's poetics. Ahalyā is repeatedly becoming something else. The stone becomes woman; the woman becomes stone. The poem does not give us an essence beneath these transformations. Instead, it gives us process. This makes the poem philosophically compatible with traditions of thought that understand identity as becoming rather than static being. Without imposing a particular philosophical system upon the poem, one can observe that Ahalyā exists through transformations. Her identity is relational and temporal. Yet there is a darker implication. If becoming is controlled by external agents, transformation does not necessarily constitute freedom. Ahalyā becomes woman because someone touches her. She becomes stone again because some historical or existential force returns her to objecthood. Her becoming is not self-directed. The poem therefore distinguishes between **transformation** and **agency**. A person can be transformed without exercising control over the transformation. This distinction is fundamental to the poem's critique of redemption. Rama's touch transforms Ahalyā, but it does not

necessarily give her agency. The curse transforms her, but it does not represent her choice. Marriage marks her, but the mark does not constitute her entire self. The poem consequently exposes the difference between being changed and changing oneself.

XIII. AHALYĀ AND THE MALE GAZE

The concept of the male gaze, although originating in film theory, can be extended cautiously to the poem's representational structure. Ahalyā is repeatedly transformed into an object of male perception and judgment. Her beauty, sexuality, chastity, marital status, and redemption are narrated through structures historically dominated by male authority. The stone is an extreme form of objecthood. A stone can be seen, touched, moved, worshipped, or ignored. It does not speak. Ahalyā's petrification therefore becomes the ultimate image of the woman reduced to an object. Yet the poem's final vermilion complicates the issue. Even after she is restored to womanhood, she remains symbolically objectified through a visible sign of marital identity. The transition from stone to woman therefore does not necessarily end objectification. It merely changes its form. This is the crucial difference between Nayak and a conventional redemption narrative. Redemption is not equated with subjecthood. The woman can be alive and still be objectified. The body can move and still be controlled by social meanings. The forehead can bear vermilion and still remain silent. The poem therefore suggests that the real opposite of stone is not flesh. It is agency. And agency is precisely what the poem leaves unresolved.

XIV. PUDHUMAIPITHAN AND THE AFTERLIFE OF REDEMPTION

A comparison with Pudhumaipithan's "Sapa Vimochanam" is particularly revealing because that modern Tamil story similarly questions the assumption that Rama's intervention resolves Ahalyā's predicament. Pudhumaipithan's strategy is narrative and psychological, while Nayak's is lyrical and symbolic. The former explores the consequences of the old story after the moment of redemption; the latter compresses the same problem into the single image of re-petrification. The significance of this comparison lies in the shared recognition that **the end of the curse is not necessarily the end of suffering**. Modern myth revision frequently begins where traditional myth ends. The traditional story closes with redemption; the modern writer asks what redemption actually means for the person who has experienced punishment, shame, exclusion, or objectification. Nayak radicalizes this post-redemption perspective by refusing even the permanence of restored womanhood. His Ahalyā becomes stone again. In this respect, the poem may be considered an extreme poetic condensation of the modern impulse to interrogate mythic closure. Traditional myth says: the story ends. Modern revision says: the story continues. Nayak's poem goes further: **the story continues until the supposed resolution itself becomes another problem.**

XV. SIVASEKARAM'S "AHALYĀ" AND THE POLITICS OF STONE

S. Sivasekaram's "Ahalya," discussed in Paula Richman's *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India*, provides one of the closest comparative texts for Nayak's poem. Sivasekaram's work is notable for its attention to the relationship among stone, foot, and time. The thematic affinity with Nayak is striking because Nayak likewise begins by insisting that the transformation is associated not with a generic touch but specifically with the foot. The comparison reveals that the stone motif has become a major site of modern interrogation. In the traditional narrative, stone is the medium through which punishment and redemption are represented. In modern poetry, however, stone becomes a metaphor for social structures. It can represent the weight of history, the hardness of patriarchy, the freezing of identity, and the inability of the individual to escape inherited narratives. Nayak's originality lies in his extreme compression of this problem. Sivasekaram develops the implications through a more expansive verbal architecture; Nayak reduces the problem to a cyclical sequence. Stone becomes woman and woman becomes stone. The whole philosophical argument is contained within that reversal. The two poets also demonstrate that modern Indian mythic poetry is not necessarily confined within linguistic or regional boundaries. Ahalyā becomes a transregional figure through whom poets from different Indian languages negotiate modernity, gender, morality, and the authority of epic tradition.

XVI. K. B. SREEDEVI AND THE QUESTION OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY

K. B. Sreedevi's *Woman of Stone* provides another productive comparison because its very title places the female subject and the stone in direct conceptual relation. Like Nayak, Sreedevi uses the Ahalyā narrative to interrogate the assumptions embedded in the inherited myth. The significance of comparing these works lies in their different treatments of female agency. Sreedevi's work provides a more extended narrative space in which the female figure can be psychologically and socially elaborated. Nayak's lyric refuses such expansion. His Ahalyā remains compressed into a few images. Yet this compression does not make the poem less political. On the contrary, it creates an unusual intensity. Where the novel or story can explain, the lyric must suggest. Where narrative can provide psychological development, the poem provides symbolic juxtaposition. Moss and vermilion therefore perform the work that an extended narrative might otherwise accomplish. They tell us that the woman remains caught between natural objecthood and social identity.

XVII. CAROL ANN DUFFY AND THE GLOBAL MYTH OF THE FEMALE OBJECT

A comparison with Carol Ann Duffy's "Pygmalion's Bride" reveals a fascinating transnational parallel. Duffy revisits the classical story of Galatea, the statue created by Pygmalion, and gives the female figure a consciousness capable of exposing the male desire to possess an idealized woman. The central issue is the transformation of an object into a subject.

Nayak reverses that movement. His Ahalyā begins as stone, becomes woman, and becomes stone again. Duffy's Galatea resists the male fantasy of possession by developing subjectivity; Nayak's Ahalyā reveals how fragile subjectivity can remain even after the transformation from object to woman. The comparison is particularly valuable because it demonstrates the global recurrence of stone as a metaphor for female objectification. The classical statue and the Indian cursed woman emerge from different mythological traditions, but both dramatize the cultural tendency to transform women into images. Duffy responds by giving the image a voice. Nayak responds by showing the image becoming stone again. The difference is aesthetically decisive.

XVIII. MEDUSA, PERSEPHONE, AND THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF MYTHIC REVISION

Carol Ann Duffy's "Medusa" and Rita Dove's "Persephone, Falling" further demonstrate how modern poets use inherited myths to explore contemporary female experience. Medusa represents a woman whose body and emotions have been transformed into the cultural image of monstrosity. Persephone represents vulnerability, abduction, sexuality, danger, and the consequences of entering spaces governed by forces beyond her control. Nayak's Ahalyā belongs to this wider family of revisionist female figures. What connects them is the transformation of inherited myth into a language of contemporary consciousness. The woman is no longer merely the object of a story. Her story becomes a means of interrogating the cultural systems that produced her representation. Yet Nayak remains distinctive because he does not entirely liberate his mythic heroine. He does not turn Ahalyā into a triumphant speaker. He leaves her suspended between states of being. This creates a darker but arguably more philosophically challenging conclusion. The modern world may reinterpret the myth, but reinterpretation does not automatically produce liberation.

XIX. THE POEM AS A CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHAL REDEMPTION

The concept of redemption itself deserves closer examination. Traditional religious narratives often represent redemption as an event bestowed by a higher power. The individual is transformed through grace. In Nayak's poem, however, the very structure of bestowed redemption becomes questionable. Ahalyā does not redeem herself. She is touched. She becomes woman. Then she becomes stone again. The external nature of this transformation is therefore crucial. The poem suggests that liberation imposed from outside may remain vulnerable because the individual's own subjectivity has not necessarily been reconstructed. This is not an attack upon religious faith. Rather, it is a philosophical distinction between **grace** and **agency**. Grace can change a condition; agency changes the relation of the subject to that condition. Nayak gives us the first without guaranteeing the second. The poem consequently raises a larger question applicable far beyond mythology: can any liberation be permanent if the structures that produce subordination remain intact? The answer implied by the poem

is pessimistic. Transformation without structural change remains reversible.

XX. THE MODERNIST AESTHETIC OF COMPRESSION

One of the poem's most remarkable literary features is its compression. Nayak does not elaborate the myth through narrative exposition. He assumes the reader knows enough of the Ahalyā story to understand the significance of a few carefully selected details. This technique creates a sophisticated relationship between silence and cultural memory. The poem can remain brief because the reader supplies the missing epic background. The poet therefore turns cultural memory into a poetic resource.

The lines "many archers / have crossed the Ganges" (Nayak 450) are a good example. The poet does not explain who the archers are. The reader recognizes the epic association. The poem consequently becomes participatory: meaning emerges through the interaction between the text and the reader's prior knowledge. This is one reason the poem can be described as a **modernist miniature of an epic narrative**. The epic is not reproduced; it is condensed into symbolic fragments.

XXI. THE POETICS OF NEGATION AND REVERSAL

The entire poem is structured through negation and reversal. It begins by saying what the event is not: "not ... touching with the hand, / but ... touching with the foot" (Nayak 450). It then reverses the normal sequence of redemption: the stone becomes woman and the woman becomes stone. Finally, it places moss and vermilion into an unexpected relationship. The poem therefore advances not through narrative accumulation but through conceptual contradiction. This is why paradox is not merely an ornament in Nayak's poetry. It is the poem's organizing principle. Love produces stone. Stone produces woman. Woman produces stone again. Liberation becomes repetition. Marriage becomes another inscription. Nature and culture become parallel systems of marking. The poem's paradoxes do not cancel one another. They deepen one another. The reader is not asked to solve the contradiction. The reader is asked to inhabit it.

XXII. THE ONTOLOGY OF THE FEMALE SUBJECT

At its deepest level, "*Ahalyā*" can be read as an ontological poem. The question is not simply whether Ahalyā has been treated fairly. The question is: **what constitutes her being?** If she is stone, she lacks speech but possesses endurance. If she is woman, she possesses animation but remains socially marked. If she is redeemed, she acquires visibility but not necessarily agency. If she becomes stone again, she loses mobility but acquires symbolic permanence. Every state contains both loss and gain. This is why the poem resists a simple binary between stone and woman. Stone is not entirely negative, and woman is not entirely positive. Stone represents death, but also endurance. Woman represents life, but also social inscription. The poem therefore destabilizes the hierarchy between the two. Ahalyā becomes an ontological

threshold. She is neither simply stone nor simply woman. She is the paradoxical space between object and subject.

XXIII. MEMORY, HISTORY, AND THE FEMALE BODY

The poem's temporal architecture is equally important. "Since that day" (Nayak 450) establishes a historical before and after. But the final image suggests that historical passage has not resolved the underlying contradiction. This is where memory becomes political. Ahalyā survives because she is remembered. Yet remembrance itself can become a form of petrification if the remembered woman is reduced to a fixed image. The myth preserves Ahalyā but may also imprison her. This paradox applies to cultural memory more generally. Communities preserve stories because they value them, but preservation can sometimes freeze the meaning of those stories. Nayak's poem performs the opposite operation: it preserves Ahalyā by destabilizing her inherited meaning. The poet does not allow the cultural image to remain fixed. He makes the stone move. Then he makes the woman become stone. The myth, therefore, becomes dynamic again.

XXIV. TRANSLATION AND THE PROBLEM OF CULTURAL SEMANTICS

The supplied English translation is valuable because it makes the poem accessible beyond Odia, but the transliterated original remains indispensable for critical analysis. Words such as *hāta*, *pāda*, *pathara*, *premare*, *niṣpāpa*, *nārī*, *śiuli*, and *sindūra* carry cultural and phonetic resonances that cannot always be reproduced fully in English. The contrast between *hāta* and *pāda* is especially important. "Hand" and "foot" convey the denotative meaning, but the Odia words participate in a culturally embodied symbolic system. Similarly, *pathara* carries the material resonance of stone within Odia linguistic culture, while *śiuli* and *sindūra* belong to culturally specific semantic worlds. The translator's task is therefore not merely lexical. It is conceptual. The English must preserve the poem's paradoxical architecture while remaining faithful to the cultural implications of the original. For this reason, the use of both versions in a scholarly article is methodologically valuable. The English permits comparative international discussion; the transliteration keeps the analysis anchored in the source text.

XXV. THE UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION OF "Ahalyā" TO MODERN ODIA POETRY

Nayak's "Ahalyā" deserves particular attention within modern Odia poetry because it demonstrates how an extremely short poem can accommodate an extraordinary range of philosophical meanings without becoming abstract or excessively theoretical. The poet does not explain the philosophy. He embodies it in images. The foot embodies power. The stone embodies objecthood. Love embodies vulnerability. The woman embodies social identity. The Ganges embodies time. The archers embody historical movement. Moss embodies duration. Sindoor embodies social inscription. Together these images create a miniature philosophical system. The poem also exemplifies the modern

Odia tendency to revisit inherited cultural materials without merely reproducing devotional sentiment. The myth becomes a living resource for contemporary reflection. The poet neither abandons tradition nor submits passively to it. Instead, he interrogates tradition from within. This position is particularly significant for regional-language modernism. Modernity does not necessarily require rejection of indigenous mythology. It can emerge through the critical transformation of inherited symbols. Nayak demonstrates precisely this possibility.

XXVI. THE MOST ORIGINAL DIMENSION: THE MOSS-SINDOOR DIALECTIC

Among all the poem's images, the relationship between moss and vermilion is arguably its most original contribution. Much modern criticism of Ahalyā naturally focuses on the stone, the curse, Rama's touch, Gautama's anger, or Indra's deception. Nayak relocates the centre of gravity toward the final marks upon the body. This changes the interpretation of the entire poem. Moss is the mark of petrification. Sindoor is the mark of marriage. The woman exists between them. The poem therefore suggests that the transition from stone to socially recognized womanhood may not constitute absolute freedom. The stone is covered by nature; the woman is covered by culture. In both cases, identity is mediated through signs. The moss-sindoor dialectic thus becomes a powerful metaphor for the double condition of female existence: the woman can be naturalized as body and socialized as role. Neither state guarantees subjectivity. This is where Nayak's poem moves beyond conventional mythic revision. It does not merely ask whether Ahalyā was unjustly punished. It asks whether the categories through which she is subsequently recognized—stone, wife, woman, pure woman—are themselves forms of inscription.

XXVII. OVERALL CRITICAL EVALUATION

"Ahalyā" is a poem of remarkable intellectual economy. Its achievement lies in its refusal to over-explain. It trusts the mythic memory of the reader and uses that memory against itself. The reader enters expecting the familiar story of curse and redemption but encounters instead a cycle of transformation in which redemption proves temporary. Its greatest strength is the union of philosophical depth and imagistic simplicity. The poem never becomes an essay disguised as verse. It remains poetry because its ideas are embodied in concrete objects and actions. Foot, stone, river, archer, moss, and vermilion are not decorative details. They constitute the poem's conceptual vocabulary. Its greatest productive difficulty is its silence. Ahalyā does not speak. Some readers may regard this as a limitation because a feminist revision might be expected to restore the woman's voice. Yet the silence can equally be interpreted as a deliberate representation of the very condition the poem critiques. Ahalyā is remembered, represented, marked, and transformed, but not allowed to become fully self-representing. The poem's brevity may also initially appear restrictive. It does not provide the narrative complexity of longer modern retellings. Yet this limitation becomes a

strength because it forces the poem into symbolic concentration. Its few images generate a wide interpretive field. The poem's ambiguity is similarly productive. Nayak does not explain why Ahalyā becomes stone again. That omission allows social, psychological, historical, existential, and philosophical readings to coexist. The poem is therefore not exhausted by one theoretical framework.

XXVIII. CONCLUSION: THE STONE THAT REMEMBERS THE WOMAN

Bipin Nayak's "*Ahalyā*" is ultimately a poem about the unfinished nature of liberation. It begins with touch but ends with inscription. It begins with transformation but ends with recurrence. It begins with the possibility of redemption but leaves the reader contemplating the persistence of objecthood. The poem's central movement—from stone to woman and from woman back to stone—constitutes a radical reconfiguration of the inherited Ahalyā narrative. The conventional story culminates in release; Nayak asks what happens after release. The answer is not comfort but paradox. Ahalyā has been transformed, yet the transformation does not last. The world has moved forward, archers have crossed the Ganges, generations have passed, and still the stone returns. The final images of moss and vermilion make this paradox unforgettable. Moss grows upon the stone, registering time and neglect. Vermilion marks the woman, registering marriage and social identity. One belongs to nature; the other to culture. One covers stone; the other identifies woman. Yet both function as external signs. Neither constitutes Ahalyā's autonomous self. The poem's deepest insight therefore lies beyond the question of whether Ahalyā was guilty or innocent. It asks whether a woman can ever become fully herself when her identity is continually determined through the categories imposed upon her. The curse, the redemption, the marriage, the myth, the moss, and the vermilion all participate in a larger process of defining the woman from outside.

Nayak's poem consequently transforms the Ahalyā myth from a story of miraculous rescue into a meditation on the limits of rescue. A divine touch can change stone into flesh, but it cannot by itself dismantle the structures through which the female body is judged. A woman may be restored to life without being restored to complete subjectivity. She may move through history while remaining symbolically immobilized. This is why the poem deserves to be read not merely as a modern retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* but as a sophisticated meditation on ontology, gender, memory, and cultural inscription. Its paradox is its power: Ahalyā becomes a woman, yet womanhood itself remains precariously close to stonehood. She is visible but silent, alive but marked, remembered but not fully self-defining. The poem therefore leaves us with a question rather than a conclusion. Perhaps the true opposite of stone is not flesh. Perhaps it is voice. Perhaps it is agency. Perhaps it is the capacity to define oneself rather than being defined by the touch, judgment, desire, memory, or symbol of another.

Ahalyā's tragedy, in Nayak's vision, is consequently not simply that she was once turned into stone. It is that even after the stone became woman, the conditions of petrification remained available to return. The myth survives because the problem survives. The final moss and vermilion thus become more than images. They become the two last signs upon the body of a woman whom history has never stopped interpreting. The stone bears moss. The woman bears sindoor. But beneath both inscriptions remains the unanswered question of the self. That unanswered question is the poem's final achievement. **Ahalyā is no longer merely the woman who became stone. She becomes the stone through which the poet asks what it means for a woman to become fully human.**

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