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Revisiting Mythology from the Feminist Perspective With Special Reference to the Mythofictions of Kavita Kane

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ABSTRACT

Women are generally misjudged and misrepresented models in the annals of history. This is extremely reasonable in patriarchal nations, particularly, the sacred articles and mythologies, where women are either completely resisted or primarily discerned as conveyances of men's worth. The novels inscribed by Kavita Kane; "Ahalya's Awakening" and "The Fisher Queens Dynasty" and it investigates specifically on the representation of the mythological woman through the major female characters in the novels. The female struggles have its origin from time immemorial. The fundamental purpose of this paper is to understand the dilemmas encountered by women in the era represented in the novel and the resurgence of women from the obstacles. The significance of women in a society is taken into consideration. The paper also aims in providing an awareness to empower women and thereby overturn the stereotypical impressions of women in society. The outcome of the study elucidates that women are objectified, uneducated, socially excluded and have to face the dearth of choice. However, Kane's novel attempts to deeply analyze how the female characters emancipate themselves from the oppression caused by the social norms and the circumstances in which women had to face identity crisis

KEYWORDS- mythofictions, Kavita, Kane, Mythology, feminist, perspectives

I. INTRODUCTION

Every society in human history in all generation seems to have owning, telling and re-telling a mythology that it has been fascinated and intrigued. In that sense every soul is entangled in some myth. One turns to myth not for searching binary answers instead to broaden one's understanding, gain wisdom and deepen universal insights that one typically misses out by the limited repertoire of thought, experience and personal narrative.



It's fascinating how human societies systematically construct their ideologies through mythology. Monica Khanna Jhalani in her book *Revising Indian Mythology* points out how patriarchy used mythology to popularize the ideologically constructed identity of women in Indian society. While examining five prominent female characters in Hindu myths, Sita, Gandhari, Draupadi, Ahalya and Surpanaka in her book she illustrates that mythology not only provides role models a woman must emulate, but also illustrates the consequences of transgressing the boundaries prescribed for women. However, certain literary texts have attempted to reinterpret mythological characters, and have given them a different dimension. She examines how contemporary authors have questioned, 're-visioned' and consequently subverted the stereotyped images of women in Hindu mythology. Thus, there is 'de-mythification' and consequently 're-mythification' of the original myths. Her analysis brought out new dimension to revisioning mythology. This article is a study on Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* (2014) to examine Urmila's character that was neglected and overlooked in original versions and break down Kavita Kane's redressal effort. Urmila is Rama's brother Lakshman's bride, whom he left behind in the palace of Ayodhya for fourteen lonely years. Instead pause and ponder Urmila could have insisted on joining her husband as Sita did.[1,2,3] But she did not. Instead, she silently held her tears, fought her tragedy and loneliness. Kavita Kane's Urmila is



vulnerable yet strong, beautiful and young woman with full of life and hope to live her normal life but become a victim of someone's action, her husband's decision to accompany his brother to forest leaving his young bride. Like Alicia Ostriker states in her essay *Stealing the Language*. "we cannot measure the work of women poets, past or present, without a thorough--and if possible demystified-- awareness of the critical context in which they have composed and continued to compose their work (3). Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* is one of the classic examples of Feminist revisionist mythology. A revision mythmaking is a strategic revisionist use of gender imagery and is a means of exploring and attempting to transform the self and the culture or, in other words, to "subvert and transform the life and literature women poets inherit". Lisa Tuttle has defined feminist theory as asking new questions of old texts and she cites the goals of feminist criticism as "(1) developing and uncovering a female tradition of writing, (2) interpreting symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view, (3) rediscovering old texts, (4) analysing women writers and their writings from a female perspective, (5) resisting sexism in literature, and (6) increasing awareness of the sexual politics of language and style" (186). Feminist revisionist mythology tends to fulfil at least one of these goals. The hallmark of the Indian mythology is its strong female characters who had created a niche for themselves, through their strong sense of individuality. These strong women despite flagging their individuality, had also displayed immense courage and mind of their own. They trusted their sensibilities and were bestowed with sharp acumen. Revisioning their tales through contemporary lens only adds to their inherent beauty and undiscovered charisma of their character. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni - The Story of Draupadi* are both retellings of the great epic *Mahabarath*, through *Draupadi's* point of view. Ray projected *Draupadi* as a devoted wife and *Divakaruni* let her heroine long for the love of two invincible men *Karna* and *Krishna*. Recent writers like *Kavitha Kane*, *Saiswaroopa Iyer*, *Utkarsh Patel* have wielded their pens to revision the myths in feminist lens. Authors have used several methods of revising the myths, retelling them from the point of female characters, thereby breaking down the treatment of women as docile and submissive characters, but transform them as individuals of sustainability. *Frances Babbage* in her work *In Revisioning Myth: Modern and Contemporary Drama by Women* says, "Myths and practices of rewriting can be means of revealing shared attitudes and experience" (5). She explores the ideological and aesthetic potential of such practice and elucidates the tensions that are seen in the narratives that have fundamentally shaped the western thought. *Kavitha Kane* is considered as a revolutionary force in Indian writing, introducing a feminist perspective in Indian Mythology.[2,3,4] To an interview to the *Hindu*, Kane has stressed the importance of mythology: If myths reflect the socio-cultural ethos of earlier times, they can also be used to contemporaries those same issues in today's world. Actually, nothing has changed. Love, rivalry, disappointment, war, anger, greed, all these emotions still exist. There's a chance of an alternative perspective by looking at the epics through the women and minor characters at that. (*The Hindu*) Kane believes that mythology is a literary device to portray contemporary issues and sensibilities. She has written few books over the years that are dominantly feminist in nature. She recreates the stories by introducing most unusual characters that have a little say in the original text. Kane's *Sita's sister* deals with *Urmila*, the little-known wife of *Lakshman*. *Ramayana* hadn't given much significance to this character but Kane has embellished her as a titular character, as breathing heroine, who anchors the family of *Rama* under greater troubles. Kane has thus subverted the stereotyped image of women in mythology. The sacrifice rendered by *Lakshmana* and *Urmila* in *Ramayana* is not much spoken of. When *Lakshmana* wanted to serve his brother and his wife in the forest during their exile, he ignored sleep and that was possible as his wife *Urmila* embraced sleep for fourteen long years on behalf of him. Though a young wife, *Urmila* could surrender herself to her husband's utmost desire of service, by shunning all the pleasures of palace life. Kane has weaved a brilliant imagination of *Urmila's* life in the fourteen years sculpting her as a matchless heroine, as one who undergoes immitigable pain and anguish, just to render her service to her husband *Lakshmana*. She says, "Interpret the sleep as a metaphor for loneliness and loss" (*The Hindu*). When *Lakshman* chooses to accompany his brother *Ram* to the forest, *Urmila* could have insisted joining him but she does not. Kane reasons out *Urmila's* much preferred duty to her husband and shapes her character as one who possesses much wit, grit and vivacity. *Janak's* four daughters *Sita*, *Urmila*, *Mandavi* and *Shruta Kirti* get married to the four sons of *Ragukula* clan, *Ram*, *Lakshman*, *Bharath* and *Satrukan*. The novel gears up after these young women move into their in-law's family at *Ayodhya*. Everything seems to be rosy at the beginning but the misfortune befalls on them when *Ma Kaikeyi* gets the promise from *King Dasarath*, to make her son *Bharath* the King of *Ayodhya*. Further she demands *King Dasarath* to send *Ram* into fourteen long years of exile to the forest. *Urmila's* real struggle begins at this juncture. She is numb at this merciless demand which trifles her as a bullet. Her brain stumbles at the sudden twist of events and gets shattered further when *Lakshman* decides to escort *Ram* and *Sita* to the forest. He says to *Ram*, "We have always been together; we are, as you said, one soul in two bodies. So do not refuse me *Ram*, because I shall follow you nevertheless. You cannot stop me" (140). She is speechless as she watches the two people who she loved have taken the decision to leave her for fourteen years. She is torn with conflicting emotions and feels bereft and unwanted. She lashes *Lakshman* with hurtful words intentionally to hurt him, "You cannot stay back for me because your brother is more precious than your wife. You are not like your father to listen to his wife, are you?" (147). She taunted. When *Lakshman* leaves with *Ram* and *Sita*, *Urmila* is satisfied with her behaviour, hurt him wilfully only to make him hurt her. She feels she has made it easier for him to hate her, rather than love her for the next fourteen years of separation.[3,4,5] It is here in this context Kane's *Urmila* stands up. *Urmila's* love for her husband is divine and



selfless. When Ram feels sad for taking Lakshman with him she says, "It's for a higher calling, a nobler mission, you are taking my husband. He will always be there for you" (154). Her nobility in accepting the duty and mission undertaken by her husband implicates her devotion towards her role as a wife and daughter-in-law. At the time of their departure, Lakshman understands her intention of hurting him and convinces her, "It's the memory of our full, sustained love which will never make us feel alone or lonely" (157). In the palace, Urmila uses all her strategy to put cunning Manthara in her place. When she has an opportunity to deal with Manthara, she retorts, "I'm not in a habit of discussing my personal life with maids" (167). Manthara loses her ground as her deviousness is now exposed and this is the first victory in the palace for Urmila. She also assures Manthara that Bharath would never accept the crown and that he would throw her out and hate his mother forever for the ignoble act of hers. On his return Bharath understands his mother's evil intension and screams, "She has harmed me, my name, my character, my reputation, my ideals" (192). But Urmila is shocked at his brutality and advises him not to speak such harsh words to his mother as she's not his enemy but his mother. She's able to hide her pain and advises her brother-in-law of the noble things he needs to embrace for the welfare of the Kingdom. When Bharath leaves the palace of Ayodhya to meet Ram in the forest, Urmila refuses to go with him to persuade Lakshman to come back. Instead, she says with much resolve, "I am needed at the palace, I shall remain here with Mandavi and Kirti" (208). But Sumithra convinces her to go with the troop to meet Ram and Lakshman in the forest

II. DISCUSSION

The trend of introducing the New Woman in the novels started in India from the time when India got independence. These women characters were termed as the New Woman because they opposed the traditionally patriarchal mentality, orthodox concepts and values. She differed from the conventional ideal woman who was meek, submissive, oppressed and surrendered before the patriarchy. But the question that arises is whether no such woman ever existed before twentieth century? Is the New Woman a product of modern world? The answer is in negative. It is true that the term and the concept came to its existence in the modern time but traces of the characteristics that the New Woman possess can be found in our mythologies that narrates the stories of incidents that happened in ancient times. This paper focuses on two such female characters from Indian mythology who were bold, fierce, brave and assertive. They had a broad outlook even in the ancient period. They were ready to oppose and resist the traditional norms whenever necessary. The two female characters discussed in this paper are Urmila from Kavita Kane "s Sita " s Sister and Paanchali from Chitra Banerjee " s The Palace of Illusions. Both these characters have been portrayed as a woman who is strong, bold, fierce and assertive, having an independent existence. They are capable of taking their own decisions and also ready to face the consequences of those decisions.[4,5,6] They stood for what they thought was right and resisted what according to them was wrong. The way both the characters have been portrayed, they surely can serve as role models for today " s feminists. Thus it may not be wrong to refer Kavita " s Urmila and Chitra " s Paanchali as the forerunners of the New Woman. New woman' is the term that makes us think of the woman who shakes off all the shackles of the patriarchal society and comes into the mainstream of the society. The new woman is the one who is uplifting herself from the old thought that a woman can not face the harsh realities. The New woman differs from the conventional ideal woman who was meek, submissive, oppressed and surrendered before the patriarchy. The tendency of introducing the New woman in novels started in India from the time when India got independence. These women characters were termed as the New Woman because they have the capability of opposing the conservative ideas.

Kavita Kané (born 5 August 1966) is an Indian writer and former journalist. She is known for writing Mythology-fiction.^[1] All of her books are based on Indian mythology. Her bestselling novel is Karna's wife: the Outcast Queen'.^[2] She is an author of the new era of retelling. Born in Mumbai, Kavita Kané grew up in other cities like Patna, Delhi and Pune. She is an alumna of Fergusson College, Pune and has completed her post graduation, both in English Literature and Mass Communication, from the University of Pune. Although, initially, she wanted to be in the administrative services, she chose a career in journalism because she wanted to write and it was the only pragmatic career option for writing. She worked for 20 years in various media houses - Magna Publications, Daily News and Analysis and The Times of India. After the success of her debut novel, Karna's Wife, she opted to become a full time author. Her childhood was spent entirely in Patna, Delhi and Pune, with her parents and two sisters. She admits the best companions for all of them were not just each other - but books. 'My father has a personal collection of over 10,000 books and if you did not read, you were considered a freak!' A die-hard aficionado of cinema and theatre, her hobbies are limited to reading - and her family.^[5] Married to a mariner, Prakash Kane, she lives in Pune with two daughters, Kimaya and Amiya, and her other family of two dogs - Chic, the cocker spaniel and Cotton, the white, curious cat.

III. RESULTS

Popular Indian author Kavita Kane is known for writing feminist mytho-fictions. She has authored seven books so far, her latest being 'Sarasvati's Gift' which was published in 2021. On the occasion of Basant Panchami today, a day when Goddess Sarasvati is worshipped as per Hindu traditions, we connected with author Kavita Kane to discuss her books



and writing. In this candid chat with us, she tells us about her book 'Sarasvati's Gift', her inspiration for writing mytho-fictions, her writing process, top five book recommendations, and more.

She says, 'Sarasvati's Gift' is, of course, about Goddess Sarasvati who is the goddess of music, knowledge, arts that we all know. We tend to remember her on this one day of Sarasvati puja every year, but I think personally Sarasvati is one Goddess who is constantly there-- she is the constant teacher, constant guide, she is your inspiration, your entire creativity. My book is not just about her as a Goddess, but about her being beyond a Goddess. There is a certain spiritual notion about her. She is a personification of knowledge, and the book tries to deal with this distinction between words that we tend to use very easily. In the book, I have also tried to address that she was also a river Goddess and what it actually means, and the fact that the river Sarasvati is not there anymore. I have taken that not just as an allegory. There is a certain scenario that just like the river vanished, what would happen to the world if knowledge vanishes from the earth... In today's world, we talk more about power and money rather than intelligence and information.[5,6]

A childhood spent entirely in Patna, Delhi and Pune, with her parents and two sisters, she admits the best companions for all of them were not just each other - but books. 'My father has a personal collection of over 10,000 books and if you did not read, you were considered a freak!' A die-hard aficionado of cinema and theatre, her hobbies are limited to reading - and her family. Married to a mariner Prakash Kane, she lives in Pune with two daughters Kimaya and Amiya and her other family of two dogs - Chic, the cocker spaniel and Cotton, the white, curious cat.

Work

- The Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen
- Sita's Sister
- Menaka's Choice
- Lanka's Princess
- The FisherQueen's Dynasty

IV. CONCLUSION

If we look at Valmiki's Ramayana (Aranyakanda) where Surpanakha is put in contrast with Ram, "His face was beautiful; hers was ugly. His waist was slender; hers was bloated. His eyes were wide; hers were deformed. His hair was beautifully black; hers was copper-colored. His voice was pleasant; hers was frightful. He was a tender youth; she was dreadful old hag. He was well spoken; she was coarse of speech. His conduct was lawful; hers was evil. His countenance was pleasing; hers was repellent." (16.8-9) (Erndl) How do we identify Surpanakha or how we describe her to our children? As someone who belongs to the clan of Rakhshas, the one was ugly, evil with a chopped nose. This stereotypical depiction of Surpanakha exists in our mythology is revisited by Kavita Kane in her 2017 mytho fiction novel, Lanka's Princess. Surpanakha which means the woman „as hard as nails“ faces the turmoils of her life alone, away from the powers of her brothers but with her scheming, successful thinking which results in the destruction of Asuras. When we talk about Urmila and Surpanakha, their world are different, yet they were the victims of patriarchal hegemony and had their battles to fight in their own ways. Where challenging the system was the strength of Urmila, violence and seduction is what Surpanakha resorts to. Surpanakha's life and her scheming revolves around her upbringing, her connect and disconnect with her siblings, the open gender bias shown by her mother, rejection, her marriage, imposed widowhood and loss of her son, her self-imposed exile, revenge and ultimately her freedom and compassion. Entangled with her life is that of the life of Kaikesi, her mother who plays a dominant role in the rejection of a Meenakshi time and again. Lanka's Princess asserts and highlights how unwanted a girl child is made to feel in her own house. The text explores how hard it becomes for a girl to survive while she not only faces oppression from the outside world but is also ignored and is unloved in her own family. Next, Surpanakha's life revolves around her only love in life Vidyujva. Whether in the human society where the Devas have taken form as Rama and Sita or in the world of the Asura, the feelings and the treatment given to these women is no different in their families. Throughout the novel is the lurking fear of Ravana who sees parallel power in Surpanakha's life, her rebellion her candid expressions and her loathful sayings towards his weakness for women. Kaikesi is seen as a regretful mother, alarmed at the fact that she has given birth to a daughter, was reluctant even to see the face of the child or lend her body warmth to the new born. To Kaikesi, it is only sons who can bring her glory and conquer what they had lost during her father's regime. Kaikesi puts in words, "It was a daughter, not a son, her heart sank, her aspirations drowning in a flood of disappointment and easy tears (Kane, 2017,p.1) To Kaikesi, Lanka is her "lost home"(p.1) while Surpanakha has no sense of belonging to Lanka. In fact she yearns to get away from the Lanka that belonged to her brothers and family.



Surpanakha was named Meenakshi by her father Vishravas. How Meenakshi grew to be called Surpanakha is connected with her upbringing in the world of patriarchy; always compared with the boys in the family, reprimanded for not being beautiful, constantly chided for being monster and living under the shadow of her beautiful mother. Her behavior, her actions which was at times on self defence was criticized by her mother and her siblings. Page nine of Lanka's Princess states, the words of Kaikesi, "Why can you not behave like a girl? Always fighting and squabbling, hitting boys and throwing stones and scratching the eyes out of anyone who provokes you. Surpanakha, that's the right name for you, you monster!" She is reprimanded by her mother when she fights for her weak brother Vibhishan by her mother who clearly tells her that Vibhishan is a boy and can take care of himself. When she applies the same rule to her defence of the dead lamb Maya, her pet and attacks her elder brother, as a sister as she intervenes in protection of her son. These nails and the name Surpanakha given to her by Ravana in anger is the forced identity that Meenakshi lives in the world of Asuras. Quoting Nivedita Menon, "it is child rearing practices which try to establish and perpetuates certain differences between the sexes. That is from childhood, boys and girls are trained in appropriate, gender specific forms of behavior, play, dress and so on. This training is continuous and most of the time, subtle when necessary, can involve punishments to bring only conformity (p. 61). Meenakshi becomes Meenu and we see a different Surpanakha when Vidyujiva is in her life. In the worlds of Devas and human society she is portrayed as a wamp while Kane gives her a very different character in her novel, Lanka's Princes. She is passionate wife of Vidyujiva, like all young girls of her age, she is the woman who is the most misunderstood, and she is the woman who built a life round the only man whom she trusted, her husband. Like Sita, she is passionately in love; she is worried about the honor of her husband, just as Sita. She spent most of her life in the forest just as Sita, spent most of her life in exile and her motherhood in the forest. Surpanakha protected her son, rears him and was his Guru, just as Sita. Surpanakha rebels against gender rules imposed on her by her family, rebels against the honor killing of her husband in the hands of her brothers, has outburst of violence in the novel in order, to protect herself and is a victim of gender based injustice in the hands of her family. "Long sufferance was not strength; it was an infliction of the weak" to Surpanakha (Kane, 2014, p. 154).

Our Hindu society has hinged upon its culture, tradition, moral, Kosher and values on great epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These sagas have and will always rule our values and belief system. As Roland Barthes asserts in his Mythologies, myth is a special form of the myth told with an intention. However, while writing such epics, there are voices that are often left unheard and not paid much heed, to name a few like Ahalya, Urmila, Vrinda, Mandodri and Shilavati. Revisiting mythology thereupon gives voice to the quite characters in the epics. The paper thus relates to the present issues of society like gender discrimination and insecurity based on looks and skin colour, feminism and violence by intertwining through the mythological representation of the characters. The persona of Urmila and Surpanakha has always been eclipsed by the other prime characters in Ramayana. Thereupon, the study represented the dramatis personae in the mythology revisiting through the selected novels by Kavita Kane.[6]

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