

Denial of Selfhood in Kavita Kane's select novels

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ABSTRACT

This paper throws light on the denial of one's own right based on patriarchal impositions levied on women of all ages. Even epic heroines have been voiceless because of the social conventions set by the male dominated society. The prolific writer Kavita Kane has skillfully portrayed the intricate details of the Indian Epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* by retelling the story from perspectives of unvoiced characters like Urmila, Menaka, Surpanaka and Satyawati. These epic characters are treated inferior for being born as women and subjugated for violence based on gender discrimination, caste consciousness and hegemonic oppression which prevail in our society. Through the concept of recontextualizing the ancient literary artifacts, recent mythology writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakantan, Kavita Kane recreate the marginalized characters in epics to reiterate about the quest for identity. Through the lens of revisionism, writers have brought out the plight of women, battling not only for justice but for establishing their dignity. Emotions of a woman are suppressed under the banner of racial prejudices and inequality. Using mythology as a background, Kane elucidates the journey of women protagonists who manipulate to pave a new way for themselves in this male supremacy world.

KEYWORDS: Selfhood, Identity Crisis, Marginalization, Victim, Caste-consciousness, Patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

Indian English Literature traces its origin from a travel narrative *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* written by Sake Dean Mahomed in 1794. Sometimes it derived its themes and characters from ancient scriptures that leads to the establishment of certain divergent ideologies. Mythology is the genesis of every religion and culture in the world. The word 'Mythology' is an amalgamation of two Greek words 'mythos and logos', the former means 'speech' or 'discourse' whereas the latter is known as 'fable' or 'legend'. Mythic episodes are featured prominently in our great epics like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. Mythology often reiterates and establishes certain stereotypes that become integrally rooted in our society. 'Myth Revisionism' refers to the act of looking back or viewing old narrative from a new perspective. It usually restructures the traditional characters which have been marginalized in ancient texts. Contemporary Indian Mythology writers like Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakantan, Kavita Kane, Anuja Chandramouli often recreate some unvoiced or marginalized characters from the epics as well as ancient works and throw light on minor characters. Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* reconstructs the ancient myth with an attempt at reconciling religion and myth with science. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's revisionist text *The Palace of Illusion* deals with Draupadi's identity crisis. Modern Mythology writers break the age old shackles of stereotypical concept of women being submissive to male gender. Kavita Kane, being a prolific myth writer, reexamines the marginalized women characters resetting them against traditional codes. These writers weave mythology with contemporary mindset, thereby modernizing the past and decontextualizing the present. This paper highlights Kavita Kane's demystified themes in her works. Her revised mythical work addresses modern issues and demonstrates how women have been objectified as weaker sex intended for physical pleasure.

Kane, in her novel *Sita's Sister* explores the feminist thoughts of Sita's own sister Urmila. The novel is a narration of the epic *The Ramayana*, from the perspective of Urmila. Her selfhood is denied in name of ethical conventions prevailed in ancient times. The novel depicts Sita, the eldest of the four and the adopted daughter of Janak and Sunaina, the king and queen of Mithila, whereas Urmila is born one year after Sita's adoption. The two cousins, Mandavi and Shrutakirti are daughters of Kushadhvaj, younger

brother of Janak. After the death of Chandrabhaga, the mother of Mandavi and Shrutakirti, the daughters have been fostered by their uncle and aunt as their own daughters. Kane highlights the impregnable sisterhood among the four princesses of Mithila through Janak. Being an astute, highly philosophical and a feminist father, he never hurdled in the way of his daughters who have free spirits to share their ideas and questions against any injustice prevailing in their court. They often stand up for each other in crisis. When Urmila knows about Sita being an adopted child, she has never treated her in indignant way. Instead she has been the pillar of strength for Sita .

When four sisters are married to the four princes of Ayodhya, they are delighted to be together in their in-law's home. When Urmila discovers about Sita's abduction by Ravan, she questions the elders that why no one has stopped Sita, when she accompanied her husband Ram to forest knowing the danger. Moreover she questions the dharma of a husband when her sister Mandavi has been deserted by her husband Bharat in name of brotherhood. Whenever she takes a stand for her sisters, Urmila is oppressed and ignored by the restrictive laws of patriarchal society. She is forged and condemned severely even by their Guru Kashyap, when she has advocated for their rights, "Do you think this is your father, king Janak's court that encourages free thinking women like that philosopher Gargi to debate and argue shamelessly? This is not so! This is the assembly of greatest minds of Ayodha"(Sita's Sister 219). Urmila's right of questioning is turned down for being a woman. Through Urmila, the author portrays that women are not even allowed to voice their opinion and are muted in this society on the basis of gender discrimination. Urmila has advocated for the rights of women belonging to the royal families and questions the male dominated society, whether they have accomplished their duty as protector of their loved ones. She stands for the rights of her sister. She staunchly vents out her anger on Ram, when she has heard the trail of Sita, doing agnipariksha to prove her fidelity. Urmila struggled for selfhood on behalf of all women by exhibiting her emotions through following lines, "Don't you have any duty, any compassion toward them? If you could not keep the vows you made to your wives, why did you brothers marry? (223). Thus women are pushed to the verge of accepting the codes of andro-centric and gender discrimination prevailing in this society. Her quest for identity has been shattered by hegemonic oppression based on gender. Mithila, her birth place never treated her women shabbily like Ayodhya. Thus Kane, through Urmila's character, captures the plight of women through the lens of revision technique concluding that women who strive for individualism, identity and dignity end up in hopeless future that usually descend into darkness.

Kane, in her enthralling work *Menaka's Choice*, vividly depicts the heart-wrenching story of Menaka, heavenly apsara who has been exploited for sex and victimized in the name of heavenly duty by Indra, Lord of Indralok. The author narrates the journey of Menaka from her birth as a celestial nymph who has aroused diaphanously from the Ocean of milk. She has been solely created to distract, seduce and destroy rishis who usurp the heavenly throne of Indra. They are engendered to entice men to be away from their goals and lead them astray. Even though apsaras are women, they can never be a wife or a mother. They are deprived of their rights to marry and beget children. Menaka is condemned violently for her secret marriage with Vasu, king of Gandharva for the fact that apsaras are not allowed to marry anyone in Indralok. They are trained to be heartless and often used as a weapon to achieve motives of other Devas.

When Menaka has been conceived with Vasu's child, she is punished ruthlessly by giving two choices, either to give up her child or her husband, Vasu. She is deprived of her right to keep her child. Indra's choice infuriated her to protest for her selfhood "A woman of lust but who cannot love, wed or conceive. Your land of great wealth and wantonness does not favour social equality...!" (*Menaka's Choice* 46). Menaka battles for equality, justice and even willing to leave Amaravati with her baby. But Indra's indulging weakness for Menaka, forced her to give up her child, Pramadvava without getting a glimpse of the baby's face after her delivery. Vasu is ordered by Indra to snatch away the baby from Menaka, the moment it has been born. Kane portrays desperateness of a mother through Menaka's words, "you have snatched her and her memory which I could have cherished as mine"(56). Indra's jealousy regarding Menaka's love for Vasu has made him stoop low to devise a despicable plan of using

Rambha, who has trivialized her sex as a weapon to banish Vasu from Indralok. Menaka advocates for justice for her innocent husband and vowed not to entertain in Indra's court until Vasu returns.

Through Menaka, the author narrates how women have to battle for their dignity and justice. Kane exposes the hideous motive of Indra, who always uses sex as a weapon to achieve his motive. Apsaras are deprived of motherhood, where they are privileged to give but do not take anything in return. Again Menaka has been assigned to persuade Rishi Viswamithra to deviate him from achieving his goal as Brahmarishi. She agreed to seduce Viswamitra as she is desperate to escape from Heaven. She has thought Vishwamitra would be a legitimate opportunity of escape from Indra. At last she seduces Vishwamitra to an extent of making him to propose for marriage. But Menaka refuses as she has no intention of getting caught into another net of lulled security as she has barely escaped from prison of Heaven. On Indra's order, Kama's love arrow strikes Menaka to fall in love with Vishwamitra to distract her from thoughts of Vasu and also to dissipate the powers of Vishwamitra. Menaka is again a prey for Indra's thirst for power. As planned by Indra, Menaka's boundless love for Vishwamitra leads to the birth of a baby girl named Shakuntala. Vishwamitra is bound by his love for Menaka and his fatherly duties distracted him from his ambition of becoming Brahmarishi. But Menaka who suffers from the guilt, has decided to reveal the truth to save him from knowing as lost man. She decides to sacrifice her love and ready to earn his hate just to save him and push him to seek his glory of becoming a Brahmarishi. After the revelation of truth, Vishwamitra has cursed Menaka that they will never meet after that incident. Thus Menaka willingly gives up her baby girl as Apsaras do not allow to bring children to heaven and her love for Vishwamitra to make him achieve his dream of becoming Brahmarishi. Kane at last portrays how a woman has denied of her own rights and willing sacrifices everything for their loved ones.

Kavita Kane in her novel *Lanka's Princess*, beautifully weaves the tale of Meenakshi who transfers into Surpanaka, a woman who has brought annihilation to the whole of Asura dynasty. The author picturizes how Surpanaka has been neglected by her own mother, Kaikesi for being born as a girl child. She is a victim of gender discrimination even by her own mother who has dreamt of begetting only male progeny to conquer her lost Kingdom, Lanka. Kaikesi abandons her baby child and goes to an extent of criticising her skin colour, "This girl has cheated me of my plans, She's quite ugly. she's scrawny and much darker than me!" (*Lanka's Princess* 3). The baby girl is named Meenakshi by her father as she possesses beautiful eyes. Meenakshi has been abandoned and discriminated by her own parent who always favours her brothers Ravan and Vibhishan. This negligence has hardened Meenakshi and she goes to an extent of tattering the flesh of her elder brother Ravan, on killing her pet, Maya and it was Ravan who cursed Meenakshi with a devilish name Surpanaka for attacking him with her sharp claws. This incident has stirred a blazing rage that coils slowly inside Meenakshi to avenge Ravan for slaying her dear pet. Kane reiterates that whenever a woman protests for injustice done to her, she will be cursed with licentious names. Ravan expresses his aversion through his statements, "You ugly wretch! Surpanaka that's what she is. A witch with long claws. I'll break your bloody arm, Surpanaka!" (8). This incident has provoked and determined her to be Surpanaka if it can protect her. Meenakshi often feels vexed about her marriage as no one has approached her for the fear of her mighty brothers Ravan, Kumbakarana and Vibhishan. She has been dominated by her overpowered brothers in all aspects of her life.

When Meenakshi decides to accept Vidyujiva as her suitor, she is scorned and opposed by her brother Ravan, who has rejected the marriage proposal with these statements, "I shall marry you off to a beggar but not that bastard!" (119). Meenakshi has no rights to choose her own husband and her selfhood is denied for being a sister of an indomitable Asura brother, Ravan. At last she is pushed to the verge of threatening her own brother Ravan of losing Mandodari in order to marry Vidyujiva. Kane vividly shows how a woman has to battle for her basic rights. She considers this marriage as an escape from the captivity of Ravan and she doesn't like to be identified as a sister of Lanka King, Ravan. She wants to create her own identity. When Meenakshi discovers the murder of her lovable husband Vidyujiva by her own brother Ravan, vows to destroy Ravan for shattering her life, "You shall pay for it dearly with your life" (176). The author, through Mandodari, wife of Ravan portrays how women folk is being denied of their rights to question her own husband and held as a prisoner when she battles to restrict the entry of Sita in to Lanka.

Women have to suppress and control their anger and frustration that ooze out from them because of men's infidelity. Ravan captivates and holds Sita as a hostage in Asokavana. In order to avenge for the murder of Vidyujiva, Meenakshi decides to transform herself as Surpanaka and has used Sita as a bait to bring down Ravan and his kingdom Lanka. Through immoral means, Surpanaka has brought destruction to her own Asura Dynasty and Ravan is thus killed by Ram in the battle of Dharma to rescue his wife. The news of Ravan's death has brought a sense of fulfillment.

Meenakshi has turned into Surpanaka due to the negligence and dominance by her own family members who have never identified her as an individual woman with her own dreams and aspirations. At last she has witnessed the destruction of her own beloved brother Kumbha and her foster son, Indrajit. In order to revenge Ram and Lakshman for murdering her grandmother Tataka, her brother Kumbha, Indrajit and her son Kumar, she enters Ayodhya as a handmaid and smears the name of Sita by spreading rumour about Sita's stay in Ravan place. Kane ends with a heart ripping scene where Surpanaka submerges herself in the ocean to the eternal darkness after forgiving Lakshman for slaying her son, Kumar with desperateness for destroying her own family. The novel ends with a note that even though Surpanaka is a demon woman, who belong to Asura dynasty, she too possess motherly fondness and compassion has made her to forgive Lakshman.

Kavita Kane retells the rebellious challenges faced by Satyavati in her thrilling novel *Fisher Queen's Dynasty*. In preamble, Satyavati becomes a mother by conceiving Parasha's child illegally before the wedding and even delivers her first son to Rishi Parashar without a second thought about her future. Being born as a girl, she is deserted by her own father, Uparichar Vasu, the king of Chedi. She is brought up by a fisherman-chieftain, Dasharaj. In spite of being born as a princess, she is unacknowledged by her own father, a renowned king. She is addressed as Kali, due to her dark complexion, dark hair and dark eyes. She faces discrimination for her downtrodden caste as fisherwomen and of her dark colour. Rishi Parashar calls her as Matsyagandha, a girl with a fish smell. This name displays the caste-conscious stigma prevailing in the ancient society. The constant humiliation based on her caste and colour triggers her to be more ambitious to gain power. When she ferries Rishi Parashar across the river, she is seduced by him and in return she asks him to make her fragrant and earned a name as Yojanagandha, who can entice anyone with her musky fragrance. Thus she uses her body to turn her unprivileged life into an unusual one. One day, king Shantanu of Hastinapur is allured by Kali's exotic fragrance and pleaded to make love with him. On the earnest request of king Shantanu, Kali agrees and expresses her desire to be his wife not as a concubine. This statement silenced the king as he refuses to marry a fisherwoman. Kali argues for her rights and dignity, "Am I good enough to fall in love with, to make love to, but not good enough to marry?" (*Fisher Queen's Dynasty* 66). Her dream of becoming a queen is shattered in to pieces and she is forsaken for her downtrodden caste. Kane picturizes the plight of underprivileged women, who are abused for lust and not given rightful dignity as a wife. King Shantanu being pinned for Kali's love, drives him to approach Kali's father, Dasharaj, who display two choices, whether Kali will be married to the crown prince, Devavrat or King Shantanu can marry his daughter by disinherit the crown prince. This choice shocks Shantanu who left with a bleeding heart. Thus through the determination of Kali's father has forced Devavrat to renounce his right to the throne and pledged to be unwedded lifelong for the happiness of his father. Devavrat further assures that Kali's children are the only heirs to the throne of Hastinapur. Thus Kali otherwise called as Sathyavati by her father becomes the queen of Hastinapur. Yet she is blamed and accused by everyone for Devavrat's decision. She faces an unrelenting hostility from the royal family, for stealing kingship from Devavrat. She is denied of her rights and even cursed by the king's brother Bahlik, who lashed at her through his words, "May you live long enough to regret everyone of your decision" (106). She is humiliated even by her tutor Kripa, who addresses her as Daseyi and even her own grandson, Duryothana scorns her for being born as a low birth in fisherman society. Later Satyavati realized that only through her political acuteness, she can claim her status as a queen of Hastinapur. Her identity as fisherwoman has made her to struggle to achieve her dream. She is a victim of patriarchy. Through Satyavati's character, the author expresses the angst of a woman of lower strata who is cursed to face the hegemonic oppression based on class, caste and gender.

CONCLUSION

As Simone asserts that “one is not born but becomes a woman”, all characters of Kane are victims either by one’s own gender or suppression by male dominated society. Through these works, Kane has narrated the incidents from the perspective of marginalized characters of great Epic, who suffer from trauma of caste-consciousness. She rewrites the fate of womanhood by resetting themselves against traditional ideologies. She questions the existing restrictive laws that suppress the women and shows the world that every woman has an identity of her own and has all rights to battle for her dignity and individuality. Kane colours the ancient mythical heroines in modern shades who rebels for their equality in this hegemonic masculine society. She wrestles to free every woman from the shackles of stereotypical images.

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