# Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking: Analysing Kavita Kané's Retelling

**Aditi Dirghangi**

**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**National Institute of Technology Rourkela**

**Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking: Analysing Kavita Kané's Retelling**


Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment

of the requirements for the award of the degree of


**Doctor of Philosophy**


in


**Humanities and Social Sciences**


by


**Aditi Dirghangi**

(Roll Number: 514HS3001)

Based on research carried out

under the supervision of


**Prof. Seemita Mohanty**

(Supervisor)

and

**Vamshi Krishna Reddy**

(Co-Supervisor)


Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
National Institute of Technology Rourkela
Odisha 769008
India
2020

**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**
**National Institute of Technology Rourkela**

23 September 2020

**Certificate of Examination**

Roll Number: *514HS3001*
Name: *Aditi Dirghangi*

Title of Dissertation: *Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking: Analysing Kavita Kané's Retelling*

We the below signed, after checking the dissertation mentioned above and the official record book(s) of the student, hereby state our approval of the dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy* in *Humanities and Social Sciences* at *National Institute of Technology Rourkela*. We are satisfied with the volume, quality, correctness, and originality of the work.

_____

Prof. Seemita Mohanty

Principal Supervisor

_____

Dr. Vamshi Krihsna Reddy

Co-Supervisor

_____

Dr. Nihar Ranjan Mishra
Member, DSC

_____

Dr. Akshaya Rath
Member, DSC

_____

Dr. Rajeev Panda
Member, DSC

_____

External Examiner

_____

Dr. Upendra Gundala
Chairperson, DSC

_____

Dr. Jalandar Pradhan
Head of the Department

**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**National Institute of Technology Rourkela**

---

**Prof. Seemita Mohanty**

Professor (English)

23 September 2020

**Supervisor's Certificate**

This is to certify that the work presented in the dissertation *Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking: Analysing Kavita Kané's Retelling* submitted by *Aditi Dirghangi*, Roll Number 514HS3001, is a record of original research carried out by him under my supervision and guidance in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy* in *Humanities and Social Sciences*. Neither this dissertation nor any part of it has been submitted earlier for any degree or diploma to any institute or university in India or abroad.

Seemita Mohanty

*Dedication*

*This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother.*

*Aditi Dirghangi*

# Declaration of Originality

I, Aditi Dirghangi, Roll Number 514HS3001, hereby declare that this dissertation entitled *Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking: Analysing Kavita Kané's Retelling* presents my original work carried out as a doctoral student of NIT Rourkela and, to the best of my knowledge, contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor any material presented by me for the award of any degree or diploma of NIT Rourkela or any other institution. Any contribution made to this research by others, with whom I have worked at NIT Rourkela or elsewhere, is explicitly acknowledged in the dissertation. Works of other authors cited in this dissertation have been duly acknowledged under the section "Bibliography." I have also submitted my original research records to the scrutiny committee for evaluation of my dissertation.

I am fully aware that in case of any non-compliance detected in future, the Senate of NIT Rourkela may withdraw the degree awarded to me on the basis of the present dissertation.

23 September 2020
NIT Rourkela                                             *Aditi Dirghangi*

# Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude towards Prof. Seemita Mohanty, Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, NIT Rourkela, for her exceptional supervision, motherly guidance, constant assistance and unwavering support throughout my journey as a doctoral student. I would like to thank her for her promptness and full cooperation without which my dissertation would not have seen the light of day.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank my DSC members Dr. Nihar Ranjan Mishra, Dr. Akshaya Rath, Dr. Upendra Gundala, Dr. Rajeev Panda and my co-supervisor Dr. Vamshi Krishna Reddy for forwarding me their kind help to give my thesis its final shape.

I would also like to thank all the other faculty members of the department of *Humanities and Social Sciences* for their heart-warming suggestions and invaluable support which helped me shepherd my project.

My sincerest thanks and love to all my friends specially, Jyoti Prakash Pujari, Barnali Banerjee, Ananya Parida, Madhulika Sahoo, Chaitali Choudhury, Kaushik Chattopadhya, and Sraddha Chatterjee for their profound insights, valuable feedback on the manuscript and also for their promptness in providing valuable suggestions during the nascent stage of my work when I was merely an amateur in the field of academic research.

Last but not the least; I would like to thank my family: my father, my sister, my brother-in-law, my little niece and my heavenly abode mother for their constant motivation and encouragement throughout the period of research.

September 23, 2020…………………………………………………………..*Aditi Dirghangi*

NITRourkela………………………………………………………. Roll no: 514HS3001

# Abstract

The discourse of mythology can be considered as male-centered, which means that mythological stories generally glorify and idolize masculine prowess. Women on the other hand have been portrayed as docile puppets with their roles being confined in as much as playing victims or mute observers, with no representation of feminine prowess or even female nature as such. Thus, mythology as a form of canonical literature is androcentric and since most myths are constructed and read by men (Guerin 206), women's representation in myths is usually stereotyped, repressed, and generally ignored. Feminist writers have been concerned with this absence or rather negative portrayal of women in literature. Therefore, they seek to re-read patriarchal myths and in the process, they not only represent women from women's point of view but tend to rewrite the literary canon. This study discusses myths as one of the foremost sites of the construction of ideological subjects and it analyses the rewritings of Hindu myths by the postmodern writer, Kavita Kané. The writer by employing the strategy of revisionist mythmaking has subverted the patriarchal ideology by bringing 'other' characters like Urmila, Surpanakha, Menaka, and Satyavati from the periphery to the centre. This study therefore intends to explore the gynocentric myth created by Kavita Kané in her books, *Lanka's Princess* (2017), *Menaka's Choice* (2015), *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* (2017), and *Sita's Sister* (2014), which serves as an alternative definition of female identity.

This thesis argues that the modern retellings have broken the ideological frontiers set by the phallocentric male canon and have created an alternative feminine discourse by presenting women within an imagined female community and history.

**Keywords**: Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking, Patriarchal, Ideology, Retellings, Mythology, Gynocentric.

# Contents

**Chapter 1**

# Introduction

*Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women*
*to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from*
*their bodies — for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same*
*fatal goal. Woman must put herself in to the text- as into the world and*
*into history.*

Helen Cixous (1997, 347)

Myths are generally tales that glorify several aspects of any society like human life, nature, meaning of life, death and suffering, construct of good and evil, and heroic deeds of gods, demigods, and men. It expresses beliefs and values of subjects held by a certain culture. They eulogise the origin stories, evolution, and development of a society which in-turn imparts special significance to customary rituals, traditions, and practices. Nonetheless, to arrive at a rational analysis of this phenomenon of myth, it is crucial to have a workable definition of 'myth'. The origin of the word 'myth' can be traced back to the ancient Greek work 'mythos' which means a 'story'. Myths serve the same function as stories. Both of them help imparting special magnitude to human experience. The plot of a myth often involves supernatural elements and fantastical creatures which cannot usually be explained by logic. Warren and Welleck opine that, "myth is a narrative, irrational… story–telling of origins and destinies, the explanations… of why the world is and why we do as we do" (Righter 1975, 5). *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* also defines myths as, "Myths are specific accounts of gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience" (794).

Myth is an encyclopaedic term and different critics have defined it differently. *Britannica Ready Reference Encyclopaedia* (vol.vii) explains myth as,

> The modern study of myth arose with early 19th century Romanticism. Wilhelm Mannhardt, James Frazer, and others later employed a comparative approach. Sigmund Freud defined myth as an expression of repressed ideas, a view later which was expanded by Carl Gustav Jung in his theory of the "collective unconscious" and the mythical Archetype that arise out of it. Bronislaw

Malinowski emphasized how myth fulfils common social functions, providing a model or "charter" for human behaviour. Claude Levi-Strauss discerned underlying structures in the formal relations and patterns of myths throughout the world. Mircea Eliade and Rudolf Otto held that myth is to be under-stood solely as a religious phenomenon. (1885, 58)

Over the course of time, myths have become a basic component of human culture and civilization. As William Righter puts forward that, "Myth is at varying levels of consciousness and degrees of articulateness, a way of describing the foundations of social behaviour" (Righter 1975, 10). Basically, it influences code of morality in a society. Furthermore, myth becomes a symbolic narrative that gives significance to human existence. Mircea Eliade defines myths as a 'sacred history'; events took place in an ancient society. He further describes certain general characteristic of myth experienced by the ancient societies. Firstly—it serves as a history of the acts of divine beings and these histories are considered as the absolute truth. They are considered sacred because they narrate the deeds of gods. Secondly— myths tell stories of how things came into existence. It also acts as a paradigm for how a pattern of behaviour, an institution and a manner of working is established which later is considered as the standard to be followed by humans. Thirdly— by knowing myths one gets to know about the beginning of everything and can hence control them at will. These are not abstract knowledge, but knowledge obtained through experiences. These experiences are gathered ritually, either by ceremonial recounting of the myths or by performing them. Thus one 'lives' the myths when recollected or re-enacted (Eliade 1968, 18-19). Myths, in other words served an essential purpose in the ancient cultures by codifying beliefs and laying down blueprints for further generations to follow. Therefore, they provided ideals for human society, offering perception and knowledge behind every reason. Myths make use of language symbolically and metaphorically to disperse realities beyond comprehension. Mark Schorer opines that,

Myths are the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experiences intelligible to ourselves. A myth is a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is which has organizing value for experience. (Schorer, 355)

Stephen C. Ausband argued in his book *Myth and Meaning, Myth and Order* that the primary function myth is to reinforce order. He describes them as the "tales which demonstrate the order the man and society perceives in natural phenomena…the role of mythology lies in making the world coherent and meaningful by demonstrating or imposing order on it" (Ausband, 2). Myths are one of the distinctive features of the history of mankind and so it keeps recurring through all ages from ancient to present era. It is characterised by a fixed yet changeable nature. According to Roland Barthes, "myth is not defined by object of its message but by the fashion in which it presents it. There may be formal limits to myth nut not ones of substances" (qtd.in Righter 11). Taking account of these mercurial qualities, myths become versatile and adaptable. This in turn enables the creative writers to, re-work, re-write, exchange, and blend them with various cultures. Myths have always fascinated the creative faculty of the writers and this preoccupation with myths enables the author to create a new or to reconstruct the old myths. In this process of creating and re-constructing, myths provoke the writer's creative impulse to question, counter or subvert the apparent or veiled ideologies. Barthes further propounds that myths are, "a type of speech, with no fixity of concept and which can come into being, alter, disintegrate and disappear complete". (Sellers, 6-7)

Structuralist Claude Levi-Strauss analyses myth based on the parallelism between myth and language. Language is composed of binary dichotomies likewise myths are also formed with distinctive dichotomies of terms and classifications. He also opines the, myth across the world shares a common structure and resembles each other to an extraordinary degree.  All the cultures are organised around a similar structure of binary oppositions like animal/human, good/evil, and man/woman. These structures of binary oppositions are universal in all cultures. James Frazer gives another significant contribution in the field of the study of mythology. In his magnum opus *The Golden Bough* (1890), explains that mythic narratives in terms of rituals and ceremonies. This seminal work "is not really about what people did in remote and savage past; it is about what the human imagination does when it tries to express itself about the greatest mysteries, the mysteries of life and death and after life" (89). Frazer explains that myths also have a psychological existence, from Freudian perspective, they are the expression of the repressed desires, and they also give an outlet to the supressed desires and fears of humankind. In *Creative Writers and Day-dreaming* (1907), he describes myths as, "the distorted vestiges of the wish fantasies

of whole nations — the age-long dreams of young humanity"[1]. According to Carl Gustav Jung, myths are "culturally elaborated representations of the contents of the deepest recess of human psyche: the world of the archetypes" (Walker 1995, 4). In accordance with the Jungian psychology, the archetypes in myths are already stored in our collective unconscious. They can be described as archaic vestiges of primordial images that are "unpresentable element of the instinctual structure of human psyche" (qtd in Rochelle 18). So, these myths go beyond the personal and merges with the broader culture. Since these archetypes surpass space and time, there is a distinctive similarity between the hopes, dreams, fear and diverse thoughts of people of different races, cultures, and regions. Sigmund Freud's analysis of Oedipus myth asserts that it is the story of every man universally. He argues that the myth of Oedipus, represents an episode of the childhood experience of every boy where Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother. Jung further suggests that archetypes because they already existed in the unconscious continue to haunt us. They generate models and shape our thinking. For example, the archetypal mother represents an image of "mothering". As consequence we exhibit this archetypal image into the world in a personified form particularly towards our mothers. Therefore, according to Jung Myths are the elaborate narratives of the archetypal images. The myths become projection of the unconscious psyche into the conscious cognition. Individual myth has the capability to disclose the concealed aspects of human psyche and consequently becomes a mirror of the human unconscious. Strictly speaking, myths are the expression of the different archetypes, which are a pattern already existing in the unconscious human psyche. The myths have the ability to disclose the presence of the unconscious,

> Myth thus expresses truths of human condition in metaphoric and symbolic language, and it is only in this language, in the narrative of the myth, that these truths can be understood. They open the door through story, through language, to the latent potentialities of the human psyche- an enormous, inexhaustible store of ancient knowledge concerning the profound relations between god, man and the cosmos. (Rochelle, 19)

Alicia Ostriker also echoes the Jungian perspective when she defines myth,

---

[1] Sigmund Freud, Collected Papers, Vol 4, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1925) 182.

"Myths is quintessential intimate material, the stuff of dream life, forbidden desire, inexplicable motivation— everything in the psyche that to rational consciousness is unreal, crazed, or abominable" (1986, 212).

Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), introduced the approach of myth criticism and he shifted his definition of archetypes from psychological perspectives to literary. He argues that myths are dispersed and transmitted across the culture through myth. They permeate our lives and that all literature is displaced myth. Albeit Jung viewed archetypes as primordial images that existed in our psyche, but Frye looked at archetypes as recurring pattern in literature. He defined archetypes as, "a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to recognizable as an element of one's literary experience as a whole" (1956, 365). He also asserts that the theme of myths holds an inevitable and inescapable position in literature. Frye identifies four types of mythic narrative patterns or "mythos" like that of summer, autumn, winter, and spring each respectively indicates Romance, Tragedy, Irony/Satire and Comedy. These patterns are helpful in identifying literary genres as it organises the entire system of any literary work. Frye's theory suggests that myths, "take root in a specific society and provide for that society a network of shared allusion and experience" (1976, 19). Theorizing Frye's concept of myth proposes that archetypal images are the foundation of our culture and psyche. They also orchestrate our ideas and views about literature, culture, and society.

**Myth and Literature**

Myths have an intangible omnipresence and have the tendency of manifesting itself in man's everyday life in the form of dreams, rituals, customs, and beliefs etc. Myth dominates and shapes not only the psyche of an individual but the whole cultural aspect of any community. Myth, as a matter of fact binds a community of people or nation together with a set of symbols. These symbols are representatives of archetypes.

The relationship between myth and literature is inevitable, just the way myth is omnipresent in everybody's lives. The use of myth in the works of literature is a theme heavily employed by authors, poets, and writers. To further study the use of myth in literature, it is essential to trace the origin of such usage. Greek mythology has an immense impact on the arts, literature, and culture of Western civilization. Poets and authors from times immemorial have been inspired from the Ancient Greek mythological

traditions. The classical mythological themes were significant and relevant in the continually shifting reality. The Greek myths were part of the oral tradition and were later their plots and themes were infolded in the written literature of the classical period. The earliest known Greek literary sources are the 8th Century poet Homer's epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* that draw their plot from the events of Trojan War. Around 700 B.C one of Homer's many contemporaries, Hesoid composed poems such as The *Theogeny* and *Works and Days* which offer the story of the origin of the world on a cosmological level. It accounts the journey of universe from nothingness to being a complete whole and portraying an elaborated story of the succession of Gods, of human ages, and sufferings. These myths were passed down through generations, first through spoken words and then later penned down around 8th century BCE. Later, around 5th Century B.C writers elaborately explored and implemented themes from the ancient tales of Homer and Hesoid. Tragedians like, Euripedes, Sophocles, Aeschylus and lyric poems of Pindar repeatedly drawn themes from Homer and Hesoid, like mythological figures, events and other accounts that rule human behaviour. However, the sacred position Greek mythology held in the society was contested when philosophy made inroad with philosophers like Plato and Euhemerus, who rejected the mythic narratives and suggested demythologizing the myths in favour of rational logos (Coupe 104). The philosophy advanced the allegorical study of the myths— locating deeper meaning beyond the surface of the mythical texts. The hidden meanings were involving natural phenomenon and human behaviours. This philosophical aspect of the myth was viewed as a propensity towards rationalism. Here, in this context rationalism implies that the study of myth is to reveal deeper meanings present within the statements of mythical narratives without taking them literally as gods, monsters and supernatural. According to Euhemerus the Gods and Goddesses were once human beings, who were revered by their people because of their benefactions to humankind. The language of the mythical sagas was metaphorical, allegorical, and equivocal. But it was also believed that myths elucidate the divine truths. Plato availed myths to express the truth with the help of symbolical and metaphorical power of language. As Warren G. Rochelle quotes, "myths speak of those things which cannot be dealt with directly" (Rochelle 14). Plato never interpreted myths as texts of religious importance but used them through the power of language to reveal the inexpressible (Rochelle 15). But again, Plato was himself a mythmaker despite his disapproval of myth. This can be found in his work *Republic* (375 B.C.) where he uses the

analogy of cave to illustrate the portrayal of philosopher in a society, is considered a myth in itself (Coupe 105).

The age of classical antiquity flourished from 8$^{th}$ century BC to 6$^{th}$ century AD, which observed the interlocking of two civilizations of the ancient Greek and the ancient Rome, known as the Greco-Roman world. The culture of Greece influenced the culture of Romans to a great extent. This contact with the culture, specifically the religion and mythology had a lasting effect on the people of Rome, and simultaneously Romans adopted the Greek art, philosophy, literature, drama, and mythology. The influence of Greek myth could be found in the Roman architecture, adornment of sculptures, subject matters, and temples. In the first and second century AD, when Christianity was taking its first step towards being a major religion a roman poet named Ovid was busy recreating the classics of Hesiod and homer by telling them from a different point of view. Christianity became one of the major religions of the region by the early third century BC when Constantine announced it as their official religion. As Christianity rose, the Roman Empire started to decay and fall yet the Christian theology always carried certain elements from the classical pagan mythology. In 6th century, BC, it is believed that the book of genesis was written which re-interprets the myth of 'Enuma elish' which dealt with how Babylonia came into being. As Laurence Coupe writes,

> Genesis envisages creation as being by Yahweh all at once, out of nothing. The earlier myth, which assumes an initial polytheism, is thereby superseded; monotheism is asserted… The old cosmology lingers between the lines of the new narrative; myth is hidden within myth. (Coupe 109)

There can be found various similarities between the biblical mythology and that of classical mythology like the myth of Flood, the myth of redemption and rescue, the creation of man or Eve etc.

The pervasiveness of the classical or pagan mythology could be found even during the Renaissance. It begun with church fathers that used classical myths even while opposing paganism and proceeded through Petrarch, Giovanni Boccaccio, Dante Alighieri, Geoffery Chaucer, Edmund Spencer, William Shakespeare, John Milton, Johann Wolfgang von  Goethe, Lord Byron, John Keats and P. B. Shelly and then followed by James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Andre Gide, Jean Cocteau, Jean Anouilh, and Eugene O'Neil.

Ovid's poetry greatly influenced Dante and Coupe argues that, Dante's *Divine comedy*, "is not only an extension of biblical myth, it is a unique mythopoeic achievement" (112), wherein Dante portrayed Virgil, the greatest among the pagan moral philosopher, as a character, as his guide throughout his journey the epic poem. It is an allegorical telling of Dante's journey through the hell in *Inferno* and Climbing up the mount Purgatory in *Purgatorio*, right up to the gates of heaven.

The English creativity was also deeply motivated by the Greek mythology. Like the Romanticism during the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century, encouraged using subjects from the Greek mythology. Romantic writers drew inspiration from the Greek tragedies and regarded the poetic myths as the repository of human experience. Moreover, Homer's tragedies inspired poets like, Keats, Byron, Shelley and Tennyson and American authors of nineteenth century like Natheniel Howthorne and Thomas Bullfinch argued that the study of classical mythology is necessary for correct interpretation of English and American Literature. Greek culture became internalised, even naturalised – Thomas Arnold claimed that 'they are virtually our own countrymen' and for the nineteenth century students and language educators the classical languages established a bond between the successive generations of the English gentry. Writers like Eugene O'Niel, T.S Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and James Joyce re-interpreted themes from classical mythology by the twentieth century. In this juncture it will be useful to investigate the term 'mythopoesis'. According to Harry Levin, mythopoesis deserves a designation of,

> a technical term for imagination at work. Poesis is neither more nor less than making; a poet, etymologically is a maker; and poetry is, quite literally make-believe. The term "fabulation" … used to designate storytelling faculty, should make clear how the function of myth making relates to other forms of mental activity (Levin 1959, 224).

In other words, 'mythopoesis' is the process of re-creating stories from the past according to the present sensibilities. A mythopoet or mythmaker is just like Plato, an artisan, "weaving the strands of Greek myth into a fabric of his own design" (Woodard 2007, 5). Besides, classical myths have stood the test of time and it has been passed down through ages, so, there is a symbolic association between both myth and literature. In the traditional literature, myths were used as an allegory, like Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1472),

Edmund Spencer's *Queen* (1590), William Blake's *Vision of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) and *Songs of Experience* (1789). Milton, in the seventeenth century retold the Bible in his magnum opus, *Paradise Lost*. Here Milton re-interprets the tale of the fall of Adam and Eve, portraying man's first disobedience.

For the Romantics, the glamour of Greek Literature and art was considered a higher form of artistry, John Keats in his *Odes*, re-constructed these myths into new English Myths. His "sources were mythological dictionaries and the work of earlier English poets" (Brown 430). The new genre of novels which emerged during the Victorian period, became a ground for re-contextualizing the Greek myths by both men and women writers. Writers like Tomas Hardy, Emily Bronte and George Eliot showed their affinity towards the Greek myths. They borrowed and adapted themes from the Greek myths and retold them in their novels. They succeeded "in reanimating its traditions by grafting them on to the fates of 'ordinary' characters such as Jude, Heathcliff, and Maggie Tulliver" (437).

During the twentieth century, Greek myths were refurbished and employed in the works of many writers like Lawrence, Eliot, and Joyce. They used myth as an organising principle that might provide cure or fill the spiritual vacuum the modern civilization felt. The theme of myth was used heavily by the modernist writers to bring order in the miserable world. On the other hand, postmodernist writers were concerned about the social and political scenario with responsibility gave nouveau meaning to the mythic tradition in literature. While for modernist, the use of mythic methods in literature is to bring order and harmony and give meaning to the fragmented world. The fragmented world is displaced with growing chaos, no order, and no significance and to bring back the order the modernist writers take refuge of the mythical themes in their works. The postmodernists differed largely from the modernists in ways of employing mythical themes in literature.

 The modernists use themes from myths in pursuit of universal truth, the postmodernists tend to demythify myth so that it can, "speaks its speakers rather than the other way around" (Cowart 72).  The postmodern writers re-write and re-create both classical and biblical myths, giving them a plebeian and politicized expression. Writers like Tony Morrison and Tom Paul in recreated traditional myths according to the present sensibility of time. They used myths to represent concerns of working class cultures or subcultures in their works during the later twentieth century, in order to bring forth the issue of the

marginalised section of people, African and American writers like Toni Morrison, Philis Wheatley and Norman Mailer use the classical myth to narrate their struggles and thereby allowing the myth to acquire a contemporary status. Hence, the modernists used myths in the quest to find a unified meaning and an organised structure in human society. The modernists found refuge in myths because wartime destruction tore and tarnished the nature, and they used myth to bring back order in the disorganised world. Whereas the postmodernists undermined such view and questioned its authenticity and authority. The modernist approaches towards myth were, those ideals of myth and their narratives could bring order to the chaos, whereas the postmodernists challenge and destabilize the discourse of myth. Postmodernists like Pynchon subverted the classical myths, by countering the hierarchy that gives privilege to the classical and biblical myths.

Similarly, The *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana,* and the *Puranas* in India have been a constant provenance for retelling, re-making, and re-casting of myth both technically and thematically in Indian English Literature. This argument can be substantiated by the following quote opined by Ananda K. Coomarswamy and Sister Nivedita (1967) where they have explained the importance of myths in the lives of Indians.

> In India, mythology is not a mere subject of antiquarian research and disquisition; here it still permeates the whole life of the people as a controlling influence. And it is the living mythology which, passing through the stages of representation of successive cosmic process and assuming definite shape, thereafter, has become a powerful factor in the everyday life of the people (4-5).

The above quote explains the fact that mythology in India is a part and parcel of everyday life of the Indians. They have been circulated for over 5000 years across the breadth and length of the country, they have survived multiple retellings and alterations and they have made encroachments into the bhasa literatures of India. Mythology in India has seeped down the oral tradition and disseminated in such a manner that it has captured the imagination of literate and illiterate Indians becoming an unquestionable paradigm of ideal. They are also narrated at homes, recited, and performed outside in public gatherings which make them an important part of Indian culture. Furthermore, their aura of devotion and sacredness which grasps Indian minds give them a flourishing identity. Therefore, India is a country of living mythology where people live and experience the aesthetics of mythology.

Likewise, P. Lal, (1979) an Indian translator, poet-critic, explains the cultural significance of myth in India,

> Myth holds communities and races more strongly than language, territory and government, myth provides insights into the mysteries of life and death with a poetic richness that has startling truth and immediacy. There is no secular substitute for truth (15).

In India epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* also serve as a source of narrative models for the India English writers. In this connection Meenakshi Mukherjee in her work *Twice Born Fiction* (1974) writes,

> The Indian English novelists could benefit from the technical experiments of their, European models, emulate their stream of consciousness method, or share their existentialist philosophy. But when they came to use myth in literature, they found that they could not draw their material from the Greco-Roman or Judaeo-Christian mythical framework (16).

The Indian minds have always been in touch with its mythology and employing themes from myths into the Indian English novels was not a difficult task. As Meenakshi Mukherjee mentioned that for the people of India, mythology is close to them rather than the British people who are close to the Greek legends and Celtic folktales (ibid. 16). The writers by engaging with themes and motifs from myths and using them in the novels gave their work myriads of meaning and the cultural background portrayed by them made their works significantly metaphysically. The academic scene in India during the 1930s saw the rise of lot of Indian English novels where the theme of myth was used. By employing mythic theme, the writers looked at their experiences of the past and brought contemporary reality in a relatable way. They associated the past with present and this tool of using mythical model in literature became a viable option to identify the similarities and differences between the past and modern life. It became an answer to the criticalities and disorganization of the modern life. During the pre-independent India, writers who divulged into writing mythic theme inspired novels were and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhaya is one of them. He chose to employ mythic themes in his narrative to write against the British rule and awaken patriotism among people. In his magnum opus *Anandamath* (1883) set in the background of the Sannyasi Rebellion, he

gave a new meaning to the ideal of nationalism. He reinforced the idea of nation and reinterpreted it to make people believe that a nation must be freed from the clutches of the British rule. He skilfully used the myth of goddess Durga to draw parallel between Bharata Mata (Mother India) and mother goddess Durga (Shakti). This key of drawing parallel between the two gave the nation an identity of power. The unifying mythological force of goddess Durga associated with Mother India ushered a new force to combat against the yoke of the British. The essence of the myth of motherland becomes the guiding force for the freedom fighters to fight for independent India. Raja Rao is another writer whose work *Kanthapura* (1938) reflected the use of motifs from myths based on *Purana* narratives. In *Kanthapura,* he skilfully uses the plot of *Ramayana* and re-posits it to the background of pre-independent India. In this Gandhian novel, Kanthapura signifies Ayodhya, a villager named Moorthy becomes their local Gandhi an epitome of lord Ram and the British rule is considered evil spirited Ravana. This novel symbolically shows that the Ram's victory over the villain Ravana as the victory of India over the British rule. Rao blends mythic characters with real characters in the narrative to convey the message of patriotism among people.

R.K Narayan also used mythological narratives from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* and employed them in his works. He heavily blended themes from myths into his work in mythopoeia terms. His fictional world of Malgudi symbolically portrays elements from mythology like the Nalappa grove, Sarayu river and banyan tree. Also, his novel *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (1961) cleverly uses the myth of Brahmasur- the self-destroying demon. His works reflect the principle of Hindu *philosophy* like in *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), four stages of the protagonist's life is drawn parallel to the tradition of Hindu ashrama, Sisya, Grahastha, Vanaprastha and Bhikshu. Similarly, his work *The English Teacher* (1945) also resonates mythical story of Satyavan and Savitri but the role of husband and wife is revered here.

Furthermore, in the post-Nehruvian era, writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Shashi Tharoor are few representatives who have used myths effectively in their works to highlight the contemporary problems in the society. Furthermore, to understand Rushdie's *Shame*, *Grimus*, and *Ground Beneath Her Feet* contains elements from myths. Grimus is indebted to Norse, Greek, and Persian myths. Shame has used the myth of Sufiya Zinobia whereas *The Ground beneath Her Feet* employed Greek myths of

Eurydice and Orpheus. Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1982) utilises the Rama and Sita myth. Few motifs from the *Katha Upanishad* and *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* is reflected in the work of Shashi Deshpande's *A matter of Time* (1996). *The Circle of Life* (1986) by Amitav Ghosh is a mythical novel delves with ancient myth of Nachiketa from Upanishad. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) is a political satire modelled on the epic *Mahabharata*. These writers have taken the help of mythic themes and paradigms to re-interpret the problems of contemporary society.

In recent past, contemporary Indian popular fiction is dominated by novels dealing with the mythical past, termed as 'Neo-mythological fiction'. following the way the authors, be like Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghvi, Kavita Kané, Anand Neelkantan rework the Indian myths creatively to address the contemporary concerns as well as eternal human issues, created class consciousness and prompted rereading through caste and gender lenses. These works are the retelling of mythic narratives in their own ingenious ways and have achieved striking success in capturing the imagination of the present tech-savvy generation. These narratives probe into these changing social, cultural, and political dimensions and portray the reimagined India in the contemporary epoch. These works incorporate myths in a very contemporary Indian context which ushers a new discourse in Indian fiction in English.

This thesis explores the feminist retellings by Kavita Kané who has subverted the traditional mythical narrative by bringing the character from periphery and placing them in the centre of the narrative. Kané through her retelling has criticised the gender disparities present in the traditional narrative and gave voice to the ignored, misunderstood, and devoiced women characters from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The dominant narrative by Vyas and Valmiki has hardly given ay space to the women characters to share their part of the story within the narrative. The women characters have been described by a male perspective and lack to address the feminine essence to the text. Therefore, Kané with the technique of Revisionist Myth-making, re-makes, re-interprets, re-creates and re-furbishes the old narrative and gives a feminist viewpoint. The protagonists in her retellings are the marginal women characters who are unapologetic and fierce, they boldly questions the existing polarities in the society, they also question the strict religious customs imposed on them, they voice their opinions, desires and wishes and also asserts their individuality and identity.

**Myth, Language and Gender**

Language is the central and the most powerful medium of communication in human society either verbally or through the written mode. It is through language that one expresses his/her ideas and thoughts with other members of the society. Language is a structure of arbitrary symbols that helps a social group to interact among themselves. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* argues that language and society are mutually indispensable, for, "human society in any form even remotely resembling what is known today or is recorded in history could be maintained only among people speaking and understanding a language in common use" (654). Therefore, language is an essential element in human society because it is the only language that binds the society together. As Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski suggests, language is "the necessary means of communion; it is the one indispensable instrument for creating the ties of the moment without which unified social action is impossible" (Malinowski 1946, 310). Language thus is an essential element of human civilization.

Language is perceived as the manifestation of culture. Besides, language can be acquired and adapted by any member of a society. In this process of adapting the language, the member does not only learn the language but also imbibes the culture of that society to which he/she belongs. Language therefore grows in a social setting where it is learned by the members of the society. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* argues that,

> Language is transmitted culturally… if language is transmitted as part of culture, it is no less true that culture as a whole is transmitted very largely through language… the fact that the mankind has a history in the sense that animals do not entirely the result of language (655).

Therefore, from the above quote it can be understood that culture is a learned behaviour which is transmitted through language and without language there would be no culture at all. All the communities around the world are formed because of language and it is through the language one experiences and understands the world views. In the article "*Myth, Language, Thought and Reality: An Extension of the Whorfian hypothesis*", Allan Gullete explains Benjamin Whorf's hypothesis that language binds the culture, thought or worldview and reality into a cohesive whole. He further adds that language influences the manner in which an individual perceives the reality and act according to it. This reality is

understood as a worldview, "a picture of the universe" (214). These worldviews are the concepts of time and matter which play an important role in development of respective cultures. Therefore, it can be understood that language, culture and worldview develop concurrently and without language there will be no community, culture or worldview. Hence these worldviews reinforced by language becomes the reality.

In *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, Northrop Frye discusses that 'Word', "was creative agent that brought the things into being" (18), he further explains that the verbal culture of an ancient society comprises of stories of the existence of any society, their gods, laws, class structure and many more. Similarly, to Frye "the Bible tells a story" (32) and it "is a myth" (32) which crucially means the same. For him myth, "… means first of all, mythos, plot, narrative, or in general the sequential ordering of words" (31). Northrop Frye recognises the function of myth is to justify the existing social functions and establish an authority over the society. The bible likewise is also enriched with cultural significance because it is the "single most powerful influence in the imaginative tradition of Western art and literature" (33).  Myths therefore do not exist in seclusion, but it is interconnected part of mythology. The myths and language form the crux any society's cultural history and hence together they exist in the making of a canon because they offer a social function.

Claude Levi-Strauss in his analysis of the structure of myths explains how myths around the world function similarly and they offer clear understanding of different relations of the culture He claims that relations among the myths appear as binary pairs or opposites. Moreover, Marina Warner in her article "Claude Levi Strauss: The Structural Study of Myth" describes how Strauss shows that the myth is language, "because myth (as story) has to be told in order to exist" (Klages). Furthermore, Marina Warner also explains myth as "a language of the imagination, with vocabulary of images and syntax of plots" (Harries 18). Therefore, myth is made by language and language is the social foundation that fabricates reality through classification and naming. These classifications through language is "a powerful means by which to create a world— that of unequal power relationship" (Birch 26).

Language is a social phenomenon and is also a naturalized process of activity. The meanings associated with the language are fixed and are imposed on words that are understood in relation to other words. These meanings through the course of time become

normal and persuade individuals to perceive them as the ultimate reality. Therefore, language also socially and politically controls the society as it is "designed to convey particular kind of knowledge to achieve certain affects, usually power and domination" (Webster 66). The inherent ideology embedded in the language results in the discerning of authoritative and rigid meanings pervasively in the society. Similarly, mythological discourses are structure of language in which archetypes appear and with the help of these archetypes strict ideals are disseminated. Myths served an essential function in the primeval cultures by codifying beliefs and laying down blueprints for further generations to follow. Therefore, they provided ideals for human society and offer them intelligence and immense knowledge behind the origin of everything. Myths make use of language symbolically and metaphorically to disperse realities beyond comprehension. As Mark Schorer points out,

> Myths are the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experiences intelligible to ourselves. A myth is a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is which has organizing value for experience (Schorer 1960, 355)

However, the ideals and values in the myth are considered as the blueprint for human society. As a result, myth enjoys a cardinal position in human society and has eventually established itself as a societal paradigm disseminating an 'ideology' in the social subconscious. The inherent ideology with a politico-cultural plan and strategy crafted within the patterned mythology becomes authoritarian with time. The theorising of myth as an ideology can be also understood from Bruce Lincoln's scholarship of myth. He focuses more on the ideological implications of myth and suggests that myths are instrumental in defining and sustaining the cultural codes of a society. These codes are prescriptive and provide a symbolic significance in narrative form to the power dynamics that determine the social stratification (Lincoln 1999, 147). Thus, myth functions as a supreme vehicle of ideology. Similarly, Roland Barthes in his work *Mythologies* (1975) examines myth as a sign with ideological significance. According to him, any sign with predetermined ideological significance is a myth and can be mobilized to produce effect on the collective and the individual. He also claims that no myth is eternal, "for it is human history which converts reality into speech" and "myth is a type of speech chosen by history" (132), a speech whose "intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized"

16

(145). Therefore it is possible to interpret myth as ambiguous in nature and "the reader lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal" (149), for "myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflection" (150).

To further explain this paradox, Roland Barthes asserts that myth uses a "second order semiological system" (114). He elaborates that the very first principle of myth, "transforms history into nature" and this naturalization is accountable for transfiguring myth into a crystalized universal truth. Secondly the myth, then "is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but as a reason" (150), "imperfectible and unquestionable" (151). Therefore, it can be understood that myth exercises its ideological power by means of representation and it becomes an indisputable type of representation. Therefore, myth is patriarchy's language that subjugates women. Language is a medium to disseminate patriarchal hegemony in the society. The connotations that language carried is heavily loaded with patriarchal ideologies. It continues to reinforce patriarchal status quo and codifies strict rules and regulations. Therefore, this can go further into understanding that patriarchy designates the worldview through language, and this further leads to victimizing women. Women are suppressed under the ideological oppression and are persuaded by gender stereotypes through myths. Moreover, patriarchy uses the stories from myths to pass off the man-made truths as natural. Language as a tool has been used by male to persuade women into believing themselves inferior to men whom Dale Spender argues in her book *Man-made Language*,

> It serves to structure thought and reality so that the speakers of language 'see' men only in superior position and women in an inferior one. Male supremacy is the very core of language, thought and reality and it has been allowed to develop in this way by precluding women from the process of legitimating any positive names they may have for themselves and for their existence. As muted group, the meanings females may have generated have been systematically suppressed. (Spender 170)

Myths therefore gain advantage as the naturalized timeless truth which perpetrates patriarchal norms and values in the society. Mythical narratives represented women according to patriarchal constructs as the negative, incomplete and marginal, "denying positive symbolism and imagery to women long after they have been intellectually repudiated and within the structure of those myths women have been named as that which

is not male, not divine, not normal, and not central" (169). Dale Spender observed that the negative image of women has been portrayed everywhere in the history of religion to perpetuate the oppression of women. Furthermore, women have been muted and confined to categories conceived by men. She asserts that women must reject these categories of male creation and reinforce the patterns existing in the society. Dale insists women to break the binary oppositions created by the patriarchal language as she points out,

We make sense of the world by dividing it into male/female, right/wrong, superior/inferior, and while we continue to divide the world according to these man-made rules we contribute to our own muted state. Our oppression makes sense because of the reality we have had imposed upon us. (189)

Another critic, Mary Daly also writes that women are trapped into the patriarchal categories of gender and these categorizations are done by men because men have the privilege of naming. Language for Daly is one of the main ingredients which perpetuate the patriarchal hegemony. It is codified with hidden patriarchal meanings and thus reality is also constructed through language. She calls for destabilising such patriarchal languages and propagates a 'gynomorphic' language instead of the patriarchal language. This in a way will create a new female self. She further explains this statement and points out that femininity is a "man-made construct, having essentially nothing to do with femaleness" (1991, 68). For Daly, women must not coax themselves into believing these categories but instead strive to destabilize the language and create novel categories of their own. She illustrates that a woman's journey of becoming is "the discovery and creation of a world other than patriarchy" (1991, 1). She proposes a "woman defined woman" system countering the "man defined woman" system where women would establish a new tradition of women-centric rhetoric. Daly in her work *The Sado Ritual Syndrome: The Re-enactment of Goddess Murder,* "Second Section" of *Gyn/Ecology*, claims that customs and practices like Chinese foot-binding, Hindu Sati, witch burning, female circumcision are forms of patriarchal orders aimed to dominate women. She affirms that "patriarchy is itself the prevailing religion of the entire planet" (1991, 39). It persecutes women irrespective of their class, religion, and ethnic origin. Nonetheless, due to this patriarchy has seeped into the culture of any society and is considered normal. Moreover, the patriarchal biases and control over women are spread through myths. Therefore, she

proposes to revise these patriarchal constructs and alter the myths and eventually replace them with myths written by women. Daly opines,

> This Knowing/acting/Self-centering Process is itself the creating of a new, women-identified environment. It is the becoming of Gyn/Ecology. This involves the dis-spelling of the mind/spirit/body pollution that is produced out of man-made myths, language, rituals atrocities, and the meta-rituals such as 'scholarship', which erase our Selves. But also involves discovering the sources of the Self's original movement, hearing the moving of this movement. It involves speaking forth the New Words which corresponds to this deep listening, speaking the words of our lives. (1991, 315)

Similarly, this thesis delves into the retellings of Kavita Kané where she has unapologetically deconstructed and created new narratives that are female-oriented. She has retold and re-interpreted the age-old *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* from a feminist perspective. The fact that these epics were written by men, were also eulogies to the male characters like Ram from *Ramayana* and the Pandavas from the *Mahabharata*. Moreover, the female characters in these narratives hardly find a space in the text where they can voice their choices, desires and wishes. The female characters are described only in relation to the male characters. In the traditional narrative, they are rendered voiceless as their roles and identities were decided by men. But in the case of Kavita Kané the women characters who are the protagonists in her retellings have recreated their identity and asserted themselves as women with values. The characters like Urmila, Surpanakha, Satyavati and Menaka from her retellings were earlier put to the periphery, heavily ignored and misunderstood but Kané has given them a voice to speak and share their part of the story. Moreover, all this while the traditional epics were one-sided which lacked the voice and soul of the female gender. Kavita Kané's with her language not only created an identity for herself in the history of women writing but her language also became the voice of the marginalised women from the Hindu epics to share their lives. Her retellings are resistance towards the man-made myths.

Likewise, Simone de Beauvoir the architect of the second wave feminism in her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949) states that society is established to propagate patriarchal propaganda among the members of the society by suppressing women as subordinate to men. Patriarchy has become universalized by men because of its uninterrupted presence

through the history. This occurrence enabled men to believe themselves superior to women and simultaneously women have internalized this position. She also asserts that women have been estranged from their bodies and limited to the role of mother and wife. Moreover, marriage and motherhood are considered as the important role of women in the society and Beauvoir believes them as the diktats imposed on women by patriarchal society. She claims that femininity is also a construct conceptualized by men and women become the 'Other' in this categorization. Women have been constructed by men as man's 'Other', the 'Other' which cannot exist as a whole in its own terms. Moreover, throughout the history, men have subjugated women, depriving them of an individual identity. She writes,

> They (women) have no past, no history, no religion of their own. They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, homework, economic condition and social standing to certain men-father or husbands more firmly that they are to other women…The bond that unites her (woman) to her oppressor, is not comparable to any other. The division of sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history. (19)

Therefore, according to her gender is social construction and woman's relation to her body is also defined by patriarchal ideals. The passive, inferior image of women is created by men which are emphasised with the gender myths and stereotypes. Thus, the body of women is objectified by man and due to which women are allowed to have their own experiences and perception of their body. Beauvoir argues that all the cultural representations like myths, religion, literature, and popular cultures portray women as inferior and incomplete without the acknowledgement of men. Moreover, women internalize the images propagated by men and they start to "dream the dream of men" (290). She further claims that myths are an important framework of patriarchy used to propagandize that women are defined by men. She defines myths as, "It is always difficult to describe a myth; it cannot be grasped or encompassed; it haunts the human consciousness without ever appearing before it in fixed form". She furthers writes that,

> The myth is so various, so contradictory that at first its unity is not discerned: Delilah and Judith, Aspasia, and Lucretia, Pandora, and Athena- woman is at once Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, a source of life, a power of darkness; she is the elemental silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip, and

falsehood; she is healing presence and sorceress; she is man' prey, his downfall, she is everything that he is not and that he longs for, his negation and his *raison d'etre*. (15)

Therefore, from the above passage, it can be understood that the status of women as the other is prevalent even in the myths. Myths are the patriarchal narratives which categorise women to justify the existence of men. The representation of women is from a male perspective and throughout the history of narratives they are exploited and marginalised. Myths have muted women; their experiences and their identities and Beauvoir suggest women to reject patriarchy and take control of their own lives.

Besides Beauvoir, Kate Millet is another eminent personality in the field of feminist theories and criticism, in her work *Sexual Politics* (1970) asserts that patriarchal ideology is a universal phenomenon and it is so ubiquitous that it seems to be normal and crystal-clear. She asserts that patriarchy is a pervasive ideology present in our culture which normalises sexual domination. According to her, the entire society is entirely male handed and through patriarchy they exercise power over women. She also believes that the relationship between man and woman is political and based on the ownership of power. Like Beauvoir, Millet also claims that gender roles have been created by patriarchy and it reduces women to a position secondary to men. Women according to her have been associated only to motherhood, restricted their abilities only to reproduce children and bereaved them from any other identities. Millet also notices that while men are equated with "aggression, intelligence, force and efficacy" women are related to "passivity, ignorance, docility, virtue, and ineffectuality" (26). This indoctrination of gender roles continues to become an obligation in the society.

Millet like Beauvoir also asserts that women have embodied the images of womanhood dictated by patriarchy. According to her, religious and literary myths have also propagated the man-made images of womanhood, she writes,

Under patriarchy the female did not herself develop the symbols by which she is described. As both the ancient and civilized worlds are male worlds, the ideas which shaped culture in regard to the female were also of male design. The image of women as we know it, is created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. (46)

She further observes that myths are patriarchal propaganda which deprived women of any identity of their own and are labelled as evil. Millet continues,

> The two leading myths of western culture are the classical tale of Pandora's Box and the Biblical story of the Fall. In both cases earlier concepts of feminine evil have passed through a final literary phase to become highly influential ethical justifications of things as they are. (51)

The above quote portrays the misogynistic, negative images of women reflected in the mythical narratives which become the ethical judgement of assuming female as essentially negative. Western patriarchal culture has utilised myths to spread a negative image of women and these misogynistic images have reinforced the society into believing that women are inferior, incapable, and evil.

Therefore, it can be understood that patriarchy has labelled women according to their desires and all the narratives— religious, political, social and cultural are encoded with patriarchal ideologies. Women are defined from a male perspective and all the available literature also accentuates erasure of women's voice. The ostracism of women from history emphasises the point that they have been oppressed and the ideologies of patriarchy have been reinforced within the society. And women likely internalized this indoctrination which undermines their sense of worth. Like Mary Daly, Gerda Lerner in her seminal work *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986) also suggests women must make steps towards a quest for autonomy. She expresses the lack of female models in the texts of Beauvoir and Millet, as these pioneering feminist texts have studied only the male philosophies underlining the society and Lerner contemplates in dethroning the patriarchy with a female tradition, a "woman-centered" intellectual history. (227)

Daly and Lerner's analysis of the patriarchal language is similar to the theories of French Feminism, this group of feminists attack the phallocentric language and emphasize on the importance of a feminine discourse in order to voice experiences of women. The French school of feminism had an alternative perception towards the constructed idea of women proliferated by the phallocentric discourses. The French feminist group of Julia Kristeva (b. 1941), Helene Cixous (b.1937) and Luce Irigaray (b.1930) have deconstructed the cultural understanding of 'femininity' by re-interpreting the theories of philosophy and psychoanalysis. They re-defined, re-constructed, and interrogated the idealised categories

of representation, gender, and sex. They also attempted to disjoint the negative attributes associated to 'feminine such as, hysteria, mystery and nebulous. On the contrary, they celebrated these attributes by introducing the 'Other' as normal. Simone De Beauvoir states that men have always posited woman as the "Other" in the society by labelling them 'mysterious'. The concept of woman as the 'Other' is a universal phenomenon in the patriarchal societies, as men have always dominated the public sphere. On the other hand, women have been imprisoned to the four walls of their houses performing expected role of a wife and a mother. De Beauvoir emphasises that, men have perpetuated this ideology by assuming themselves as the lawmakers, denying women autonomy and agency.

The religious and literary myths have placed women as subordinate to man. The phallocentric discourses disseminated by the myths manipulate the people of the society that men retain a dominant position in the hierarchy. Whereas women internalize the androcentric concepts embedded in the myths and depend on males for support. De Beauvoir finds that patriarchy has used myths to legitimize abusive treatment against women. "Few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling class than the myth of woman: it justifies all privileges and even authorizes their abuse" (1960, 285).

The French school of feminism suggests women to consider the notion of Otherness as a positive attribute and explore the possibility of non-hierarchical difference to voice the female identity and feminine terms. They engaged in re-viewing and re-interpreting the 'feminine' in literature and centralise the female body in their theories of 'femininity' and 'feminine writing'. This group of feminists challenged the binary systems perpetuated by the phallocentric language. Similarly, myths are the powerful tools in the hand of patriarchy and are structured on traditional binary oppositions. These binary oppositions also dominate the logo-centrism very convincingly. According to Cixous, the paradigm of male/female binary in culture and literature conveyed through logo-centrism is a "death dealing binary thought" (Warhol 1975, 20). This further means that, in binary opposition, death is an ongoing process i.e., one has to die for the other to survive. This approach is visible in the androcentric literatures, where the texts are from the perspective of men and women's view is suppressed by keeping them under erasure. They emphasize on the differences between the binaries rather than aiming towards equality. They acknowledge the multiple subjectivities accessible to woman. Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray emerge as icons because of the importance they give to the idea of difference, which has the risk of

being suppressed by the patriarchal social systems and structures. Moreover, works by these three make an interdisciplinary representation of *Ecriture feminine*. A variety of disciplines such as psychoanalysis, philosophy, the poetic, fiction and critical theory appear in their writings. French Feminist theorist Helen Cixous was the first to introduce the concept of *ecriture feminine*, when translated into English it means— 'feminine writing' or 'women writing' in her essay '*The Laugh of Medusa*'. Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray primarily focused on dislocating the concept of femininity in the western discourse. They exposed the patriarchal orthodoxies and explored the interrelation between women's desire and women's language. There focus on feminine language laid a milestone in the field of gender studies and marked a beginning of an alternative feminine identity earlier dominated by patriarchal perceptions.

To them, writing is a medium through which the regressive ideology/language can be disrupted. Furthermore, patriarchy uses myths to exercise power over women, they subjugate women and marginalize them. Thus, mythical narratives become the vehicle which perpetrates this domination over women and French feminist aims at subverting the phallocentric myths by replacing them with women-centric myths. Moreover, female sexuality is always defined by a male parameter and Cixous in *The Laugh of Medusa* theorises at destabilising the phallocentric language and creating a space for women to speak. She writes,

> Listen to a woman speak. She doesn't speak, she throws her trembling body
> forward; she flies; all of her passes into her voice and it's with her body that she
> vitally supports the 'logic' of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. (1980, 251)

Cixous believes that woman's body is a direct source of female speaking, the relationship between the body and speaking is experienced is theorised as women writing for self to eliminate the phallic delusion. Therefore, to break the patriarchal language of myths women need to discover a non-phallic/ feminine language and writing becomes an important tool in this discovery. She asserts that, "woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" because their sexual desires and pleasure are denied from expression. Similarly, for Irigaray, sexual pleasure, *jouissance* cannot be explained by the dominant masculine language because *Kristeva* underlines the importance of body in feminist discourse. She focuses on maternal and pre-oedipal states which are primary in

the construction of subjectivity. Furthermore, she situates both mind and body together on a same plane and claims that they are not contradictory but can be brought together. Similarly, sex/gender, the representation of biology and culture cannot be thought of as different, both of them are interrelated and the differences between them are contextualised in the discourse of culture. Though, this distinction of sex/gender necessitates binary like sexual- biological and cultural- linguistic. Whereas Kristeva's proposition of the 'semiotic' and 'symbolic' does not stick to any binaries; rather it is a two-fold function that operates simultaneously in the discourse of speaking subject. According to her, 'semiotic' and the 'symbolic' refers to two interdependent aspects of language. The semiotic is the maternal aspect of the language and comprises of the speaker's inner drives and impulses. These unconscious drives manifest themselves in an individual's tone, rhythmic sentences, and images in order to express their desires. The rhythm and the tone the individual uses are essentially associated with the maternal body and thereby it establishes a connection between the 'semiotic' and the maternal body (Mukhopadhyay 2016, 70). According to Kristeva, this semiotic aspect of the language is repressed by the patriarchal aspect of the language which she calls 'symbolic'. The symbolic is the grammar and structure of the signification process, the stage where the language is sequenced and logical. Here Kristeva argues that both semiotic and symbolic are interrelated and interdependent because without the semiotic, all the utterances an individual makes will be incoherent but without the semiotic, the process will be expressionless. Therefore, both the elements are necessary for signification.

**Women, Myth and Literature:**

Myths are the most powerful tool used by patriarchy to subjugate women and privilege. They are patriarchal constructs which perpetuate phallocentric systems and privilege men over women. In *The Uses of Greek Mythology* Ken Dowden points out that, "… mythology is by and large a man's mythology, describing a world from a man's point of view. Women are seldom considered in isolation from men and seldom have scope for action on their own initiative" (1992, 161). Since myths are an important part of the cultural history of human society, they mirror the customs and rituals of that society. All

the societies of the world are dominated by patriarchy, also the same reflects throughout their myths. The phallocentric approach can be viewed in the classical mythology like The *Ramayana* and The *Mahabharata* to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, where women are portrayed with stereotypical roles constructed by patriarchy like, passive, submissive, timid and obedient. Women characters like Pandora, Eve, Persephone, Draupadi, Penelope, Demeter, Sita, Medusa, Surpanakha, Cassandra or Athena, have been represented either as commodities or blamed for the problems of the world. While men are portrayed as characters who stood out for their strength whereas women have become the ambassador of traditional ideology of unconditional love, nurturance, and domesticity. They are conditioned to become passive victims.

Myths not only reflect the society but extend male ideology by pushing women to the periphery. However, Feminist critic Mary Daly opines that all the mythologies around the world had its foundation in the worship of the mother goddess, as the source of all kinds of life. She argues in her book *Gyn/Ecology* that patriarchal myths have drawn their inspiration from 'stolen mythic power' (1978, 48). Critics like Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor presents a detailed biological, anthropological, and archaeological evidence that all the religion originally focused on the worship of the cosmic mother. They have shown that archaeology and anthropology have devalued these alternate evidences, overlooking the fact that during hunting-gathering 75 to 80 percent of a group's livelihood depended on women's food-gathering ventures. These corroborations were overshadowed to establish the primacy of the male role in human evolution. Sjoo and Mor in their work *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*, studied the earliest recorded images of human civilisation to demonstrate how originally earth was considered the female source of the existence— birth, life, death and rebirth, a belief which reinforced all the mythological and religious thinking for almost the first 200,000 years of human existence. They also documented the oldest creation myths where the female goddess creates the earth from her own body. The earliest images of the pregnant 'Venuses' found in the upper Palaeolithic remains during the 35,000 to 10,000 BCE and the burial arrangements from around 2,00,000 BCE exemplifies the connection between cyclic death and rebirth, and a universal mother (1987, 46). The extensive study on the oldest pictographs and iconography also shows the existence of the cosmic mother-goddess in all the communities around the world. Marija Gimbus studied pictographs from Old Europe between 6500 and 3500 BCE, these pictographs demonstrated "motifs of

horns, the lunar crescent and a cross symbolised the waxing and waning moon" (As quoted in Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction by Susan Seller, pg.17). Similarly, in the Indian scenario, the iconic representation of the 'lajjagauri' expresses this core idea in the icons of the Palaeolithic and Neolithic age. These groups of sculptures are discovered were excavated from various sited of the Deccan region, date variously between first and eight centuries AD (Ganesh 1990, 59). The sculpture of 'lajjagauri' is of a "nude woman squatting with legs spread out and bent at the knees in a birth giving position. Usually, the head is replaced by lotus" (ibid). Stella Kramrisch studied the sculpture and noted that tension in the muscle of the lower part of the body indicated the process of childbirth (1956, 259). The iconography of 'lajjagauri' symbolises abundance and fertility. The headless body is believed to be the personification of *yoni*. The headless feature represents the removal of face, the identity giving part, the face and it portrays the central female principle of creation literally. According to J. Ganesh, this symbolism is similar to that of the 'venuses'. Similarly, female figurines were also excavated from the Indus Valley civilization in abundance which displayed various aspects of femininity like fertility, procreation, and fecundity. These recurring motifs found in the figurines postulated that Indus civilization mainly centered around the worship of the feminine principle and their main deity was the Mother Goddess. Sir John Marshal observes that these figurines represent the Great Mother or Nature Goddess whose cult originated in Anatolia and spread throughout the Western Asia. The worship of the Mother Goddess was essential to the Harappan civilization as Oppert opines that, "They believed in the existence of one supreme spirit of Heaven with whom was associated and admitted to an equal and eventually even superior share of power, i.e., the Goddess of Earth" (1893, 574).

However, the advancement of food management techniques and the development of the use of metals during the Bronze Age triggered an interest in warfare, altered men's role, Sjoo and Mor suggest. They opined that women who earlier played an important role in the Neolithic Society were overturned by men, resulted in the initiation of the military power: "they (women) became, along with children, animals, land and resources, the prizes in a new regime of raid and conquest" (18). These circumstances inaugurated the patriarchal myths, from Indian *Mahabharata* to Greek *Iliad* and these mythical narratives celebrated war and victory. Sjoo and Mor further describe that with time patriarchal sun and sky god were imposed on the sun-moon worshipping communities by invasion, where

the primary figure of the universal mother was expunged and turned into a mere consort with limited or negative power (18).

Feminists believe that female oppression has been perpetuated through myths, and myths have been a vehicle in disseminating such views within the human civilization. Though these epics posit an inviolate position but there is also a necessity to oppose the authoritarian and discriminatory ideals to break the spell cast upon the popular minds to render a divergent narrative. It is also important to identify the mythic structures which construct irrational and unquestionable ideologies, and re-structure them by offering perceptions different from traditional thinking. Eventually, this process will expose the discriminatory power structures and contest other polarities of centre and margin embedded in the narrative of the epics. In other words, through re-narrating the myths, by countering the ideology and subverting the dominance of the partisans, the suppressed stories of the 'other' characters apart from the mainstream characters can surface. The writers need to identify the supportive mythic structures and by re-telling them through the lens of gender, re-construct the uncritical pedagogic images and de-mythify the ideology to draw attention to the issue of patriarchal dominance.

Feminist literary criticism deals with literature through the lens of gender representation and critiques them for excluding the voices of women. As Wilfred Guerin (1992) suggests, "Feminist Literary critics try to explain how, what they term engendered power imbalances in a given culture are reflected, supported and challenges by literary texts" (182). In other words, Feminist writers and critics have identified that women writers have never had a history or a past. They were dominated by the patriarchal ideology which claimed that artistic creativity is distinctively a 'male quality'. Moreover, the female tradition of writing has always been ignored, mocked, and replaced by the "phallocentric myth of creativity" (Moi 1985, 57). Most of what women wrote has been dismissed as insignificant and non-serious. Their works were never considered as a part of the sacred 'canon' of mythic literature. Therefore, feminist writers, post-twentieth century have identified a number of textual strategies to restore women to their rightful place in the whole corpus of mythology. The feminist writers through revisionism have thus created an alternative canon of women mythology. Feminist scholarship, therefore, focuses on exposing the hegemony lying underneath the phallocentric discourses. They re-interpret the established gendered texts and break the fixed meaning attached to them and propose

the idea of multiple truths. Feminist writers by deconstructing the texts and rigid androcentric philosophies engage in the re-interpreting and re-visioning the male discourses. In the book, *Language, Literature and Critical Practice*, David Birch opines,

> Feminist writers redraw the circle for us; shift the relationships of centre and periphery, of authoritative word and marginal silence…. This is not just aimed at demythologizing negative images of women; it is the development of a feminist poetics (19).

Feminist writer like Kavita Kané through the use of feminist revisionist mythmaking have deconstructed the representations of women in culture — images, archetypes and stereotypes. Feminist critics feel that the segregation of the public and private spheres has resulted in the silent subordination and marginalization of women. It is perceived that the public life is a man's domain, whereas women belong to a private sphere. Even in myths and other forms of art women are represented according to the patriarchal norms and values. In such representations the actual experiences, feelings, stories and fantasies of women are supressed (Case 1988, 7). The mythic assumptions about women have materialised into a set of values and bundles of taboos placing women in a disadvantaged position. Although an ambivalent nature towards women can also be found in the mythology where once women were worshipped for being the source of life while on the other hand women were labelled as evil. The myth of great mother or the Hindu idea of *prakriti* (nature) formed of the part of the cosmic myth: the analogy of women with the earth as a source of life. All symbols of nature — ocean, air, tree, water, are feminine, both mythically and psychologically. Again, as an enchantress or a siren woman, became a prize to be wrested, like the abduction of the Helen of Troy, Sita from *Ramayana*. Women became an object to perpetuate annihilating warfare and bitter enmity.

To deal with this ambivalence female Kané through the technique of 'feminist revisionist myth-making' have created a positive female mythology, to create authentic 'images' of women characters who can provide strong models for women to follow. It creates a space for re-charting the existing male narrative or discourse, reconstructing images and myths, re-casting an entire range of male-conceived women character: all these characters are re-created from a woman's point of view and perspective.

Helen Cixous argues that when women question and investigates these male discourses, they would find that there is no validity and truth in the myths narrated by men. Myths are articulated through the means of language, which plays and important role in disseminating social and cultural practices. Since language is a product of male ideology, the construct is required to be re-negotiated by the feminists in the terms of 'female' and 'feminine'. The female characters represented in the fictional narratives endorse the gendered and sexual roles propagated by the myths and like myth; fiction is also mediated through language. Therefore, the medium of language is used to construct/ reconstruct the ideology of patriarchy. According to Lawrence Coupe, the mythic and the literary are very much integral and for him myths, "form an important element of literature and that literature is a means of extending mythology" (Coupe 4). Thus, the literary works using myths in the narratives is a practice of "myth-making".

Adrienne Rich (1972) on speaking of the necessity of recasting the past tradition and creating a new history to establish a rightful place for women, says,

> "Re-vision–the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves" (Humm1986, 181).

The feminist retellings are the products of a two-fold process of revision. First, they are created out of the grand narrative through a process of dispersal and refraction. Secondly, they are the result of the act of myth-revision—a project which has been extensively undertaken by feminists in their attempts to arrive at an alternating understanding of reality (Seller 2001, 30). Mary Daly (1928-2010), Adrienne Rich (1929-2012), Marta Weigle (1944-2018), Annis Pratt (1937-present) and Cathy Davidson (1944-present), Margaret Atwood (1939-present) have broken away from the established Greco-Roman tradition and included global mythic representation of women from different cultures. They radically moved towards reconstructing the mythical women from the feminist perspective.

Myths since ages have propagated definite ideologies that were essentially created by men. Today writers and thinkers are reinterpreting them through multiple lenses. These

myriads of interpretations focused on feminist issues, subculture, caste, oppression, and many.

Susan Gubar (1979) points out that women writers must examine the patriarchal myths that continue to reflect stereotypes against women and asserts the necessity to create authentic voice of the mythic female figures such as Circe, Cassandra, Medusa and Hellen in women's writing. Hindu mythology also has a fair share of archetypal women that are depicted as exemplary: Sita, Damayanti, Draupadi and Savitri, to mention a few. Similarly, there are goddesses like Saraswati, Rati, Lakshmi and Manasa. The Indian female myth has been equally repressive and authoritative, mostly dictated by men, "The women were conceived as 'Grihalakshmi' symbolising prosperity of the home, 'Sahadharmini' as one who identified herself with the dharma of her husband, 'Kshetra' which is an open field for her master's use and 'Sakti' the prima source of energy " (Dutta 1986, 11). These mythic images of women have portrayed them as an object of male desires and fears. Feminist myth revision seeks to demythologize patriarchal narratives by reinterpreting the social, cultural, and ideological implications of the myths from a woman's perspective and by grounding them within the terrain of women's experience; both at the individual and at the collective level. The re-use of myth therefore lends itself to hitherto repressed possibilities of interpretation.

K.Sachidanandan in his article "The Power of Myth" writes that our literatures have come to the phase of revisionist mythmaking where original texts are reinterpreted. The different perspectives are discourses on divergent issues like feminist, tribal, Dalit. These perspectives become the prime importance in the retellings because these issues highlight the oppression and disparities present in the original narrative. The retellings are the dissent voices opposing the unjust sufferings. For example, oppressed characters like Ekalavya from *Mahabharta* or Shambuka from *Ramayana* both were Dalit characters who became protagonist and a victim of brahmanical oppression in many retellings. Characters like Sita, Ahalya, Tara, Mandodari Surpanakha became protagonists in many retellings as they were the symbol of patriarchal oppression. These retellings subverted the traditional narratives, questioned the ideals disseminated by them, and interrogated the concept of dharma portrayed by them from the perspective of characters who are in the periphery like, women, Dalits, tribal groups and other minorities. These retellings use the plot of traditional narrative to address the social inequalities present in the society.

(Satchidanandan 2014, 6) Reinterpretation and retelling are not new in the game. This medium acts as a bridge to connect the ancient past with the prevalent society. Revision as a strategy used by writers to give voice to the devoiced characters overshadowed by the mainstream characters in the traditional narratives. Hence, revisionist writing becomes the platform for the marginalised cultural group oppressed on the basis of gender, caste, race, ideology, and re-create a space within the narrative to voice their experience. Similarly, feminist writers have reinterpreted myths from female perspectives because the traditional narratives which are patriarchal and have side-lined women from the center-stage. This absence of women's voice from mythology made them pursue this approach of reinterpreting the patriarchal myths from a feminist angle and recreate a feminist literary history. They recreated a new history of women from the mythology who moved beyond the domestic threshold and resisted the specific roles given to them.

Deconstruction of myths is a crucial area of critical discourse. Angela Carter (1979) chooses myth as a site of entry into a new "imaginary" (Mills 1989, 172). Alicia Ostriker examines this technique of revisionist myth-making as, "Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible" (Ostriker 1982, 72). Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) has also dedicated much of her poetic work to decry the inadequacy of Greek mythology by exposing the confining gender stereotypes embodied in the myths. Hilda Doolittle (1886-1961), Anne Sexton (1928-1974) and Stevie Smith (1902-1971) are other few examples of critics who champion the concept revisionist mythmaking. In the deconstruction of Hindu myths, Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016), Nabaneeta Dev Sen (1938-present), Pratibha Ray (1944-present), Volga (1950-present), Chitra Divakaruni Bannejee (1956-present) and Kavita Kané (1966-present) are few other names who distinctively created a female mythology by subverting the traditional labels imposed on women.


**Retellings of Kavita Kané**

This dissertation studies the texts of Kavita Kané: *Lanka's Princess* (2017), *Menaka's Choice* (2015)*, The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* (2017)*,* and *Sita's Sister* (2014). Kavita Kané's novels reconstruct a gynocentric version of mythical stories which made those novels 'a radical departure from the historical text. With the ancient epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as her source, and voiceless heroines as her central motif, Kavita Kané pens a collection of four novels in which she makes unsung females as her protagonists. Kané re-imagines the stories of the women she selected as her heroines, who were merely a footnote in the tales of the mythical patriarchs. Kané reconstructs gynocentric version of the mythological stories and centres the female narrative. Kané highlights the significance of the female point of view on old stories. Her novels are considered an exploration of female-centred myths. The gynocentric content of these novels exposes the issues side-lined by the male canon. The stories break the ideological boundaries set by the phallocentric and theocentric male canon to present women within an imagined female community, ensuring history, power, and dignity upon them. Kavita Kané is a journalist turned author who has twenty years' experience working with different media houses like *Daily News* and *Times of India*. She became a fulltime author only after the success of her debut novel, *Karna's Wife: the Outcast Queen* published in the year 2014 but this dissertation does not include this text as there is no reference to the character of Uruvi in the traditional narrative of *Mahabharata*. Uruvi is a part of creative imagination of Kané: and she is the protagonist of the retelling. This dissertation also could not include her latest work *Ahalya's Awakening*, since it was published recently in August 2019.

**Research Questions and Methodology**

A few primary questions are central to this investigation. How do the modern mythological retellings of Kavita Kané re-modify the patriarchal myths and represent women? What is Revisionist Mythmaking and how does it apply to the modern retellings of Kané? How do these texts tackle the politics of gender? How do these texts empower the side-lined woman characters who were ignored and muted in the traditional epics? The thesis will textually analyse the primary texts from a feminist perspective in order to expose the inherent patriarchal ideology that permeates the mythology.

**Objectives**

• To investigate the overall relationship between canonical myths and modern reworking of canonical myths in the fictional works by Kavita Kané and determine how mythological references function in the context of these retellings.

• To revise the feminist critique of classical myths and study it in context to rise of revisionist mythmaking.

• To explore of the textual strategies that are implemented by Kavita Kané in order to destabilize and rewrite the patriarchal ideology in myths, and to come up with alternative definitions of female identity.

• To analyse the dearth of 'feminine language' in mythology, as well as to uncover female imagery and tradition of writing among the modern Hindu mythic retellings.

**Structure of the Thesis**

This dissertation is organised into seven chapters. The introductory chapter gives a general survey of various theories and definition of myth touching upon key contributors like Northrop Frye (1912-1991), James Frazer (1854-1951), Carl Guvtav Jung (1865-1971 and Roland Barthes (1915-1980). The chapter traces the connection between myth and literature from Homer (circa 750-650 BC) and Hesiod (750-650 BC) whose works are the chief source of mythological stories. It also explores the use of myth in literature down the ages, from the allegorical framework, the mythical framework and the postmodern usage, and establishes an association between language and myth. It deals with the patriarchal language of the myth which perpetrated negative representation of women in the whole corpus of mythology that posited them to the periphery. It also examines the feminist theories postulated by Julia Kristeva (1941-present), Luce Irigaray (1930-present), Adrienne Riche (1939-2012), and others, which challenge the phallocentric language of the myths. This chapter locates the trajectory of the female writings that created a style of writing, illustrative of *ecriture feminne*, term coined by Helen Cixous (1937-present). This chapter presents the context of the current study of the works of the postmodern writer

Kavita Kané, and how she re-envisioned women through the techniques of Revisionist Mythmaking in the process to deconstruct the patriarchal myths. It serves as an introduction to the subsequent chapters. This chapter also highlights the statement of the problem, methodology, research questions and objectives.

The second chapter entitled "Resisting Sexism: Feminist Revision and Mythmaking," studies the image of women in Hindu ideology as presented in the sacred texts like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. It explores women characters like Sita and Surpanakha who are the ideal prototype of good and bad woman of the Hindu society and examine their roles which have been disregarded in the grand narrative. This chapter in detail discusses the technique of Revisionist Mythmaking, employed by writers to revise myths in order to present a divergent perspective that was ignored earlier. It also attempts to explore the myriad of feminist retellings of the Hindu mythology by writers like Chandraboti (1550-1600), Molla (1440-1530), Pratibha Ray (1944-present), Saraj Joshep (1946-present), Volga (1950-present), Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016), Irawati Karve (1905-1970), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1956-present), and others The authors through these have attempted to evolve a female-centered language by subverting its structure, to transform the androcentric language.

The third chapter entitled, "De-mythifying the *Ramayana*: A Study of the 'Devoiced' Surpanakha" examines the character of Surpanakha, Ravan's sister who is commonly perceived as ugly and brutal. She had transgressed the gender boundary and was 'justifiably' mutilated for expressing her sexual desire towards Ram. Surpanakha embodies the label of the 'bad' woman of Indian mythology who in contrast to the character of Sita, a dutiful wife who easily succumbs to subjugation, is bold and liberated. This chapter analyses Kavita Kané's *Lanka's Princess* (2017) and studies how the text gives space to Surpanakha by subverting one of India's most popular tales of morality. She narrates her story, expressing the progressive outlook of a 'new woman' who wants to assert her individuality and is constantly punished by the societal norms for her perceived transgressions.

The fourth chapter is entitled, "Hearing the Unheard: Urmila's Quest for an Identity." This chapter explores one of the characters in the epic the *Ramayana* - Urmila - who has

suffered the most neglect and critical invisibility. She is always known either as "Sita's sister" or "Lakshman's wife". Consequently, Urmila has always remained at the periphery, never even once being allowed to get into the limelight. It is in this context that Kavita Kané's novel *Sita's Sister* assumes significance The narrative moves away from both Ram-centric and Sita-centric versions of the *Ramayana* to focus on Urmila creating a compelling feminist narrative for herself, and voicing her concerns and questions. The objective of this chapter is two-fold; firstly, to trace Urmila's emergence from the shadows to the limelight, and secondly to show how she battles and resists patriarchal prejudices of her times.

The fifth chapter is entitled, "The Other Woman: Menaka, the Divine Prostitute". This chapter examines the character of Menaka, an *apsara* (celestial nymph), courtesan and entertainer in the court of Indra. The *apsaras* were often employed as pawns by Indra on the mission of seducing ascetics, fearful and jealous of their growing power. He would send the *apsaras* to entice them from their path of mediation through sexual and erotic means. As femme-fatales, they mastered the art of eroticism and sensuality to which almost all mortal men were vulnerable. The description of the *apsaras* presented in the sacred narratives has been limited to a role of seductress and temptress only. They play a major role in fulfilling the political purposes of the gods by tantalising the virility of all their perceived enemies. They were considered loose women because they were represented to be devoid of any emotional attachment in their sexual escapades. Kavita Kané's *Menaka's Choice* differs from this view and attempts to reconstruct the character in a different light. Her story in the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Puranas* is vastly under-represented and is mostly confined to her promiscuous and sexual roles. Kavita Kané imparts voice to the hitherto mute woman in *Menaka's Choice*. Menaka in this novel breaks the regulations laid by patriarchy and makes choices for her own self, which gives her an identity of more than just being a courtesan.

The sixth chapter entitled, "From a Fisherwoman to a Queen: Satyavati's Journey of Power and Politics" explores one of the inconspicuous characters, Satyavati from the epic *Mahabharata.* Kané, in the novel, *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* attempts to impart voice to the *Matsyakanya*, who has been given a role of a mute spectator of the war in the epic. The chapter analyses the patriarchal game of power seen through the eyes of her female protagonist—Satyavati. From being abandoned at birth by her monarch father and being

compelled to live a miserable life of a fisher girl Matsyagandha, her journey to the throne of Hastinapur and becoming the grand matriarch Satyavati is narrated elaborately in the *Mahabharata*. Kané intervenes in this grand narrative, and with the help of feminist theories and endeavours to counter the popular beliefs spread by patriarchal constructions of the epic.

The final chapter concludes that the postmodern feminist retellings employing the technique of revisionist mythmaking have successfully uncovered a female tradition of writing mythology. Kavita Kané with the help of this feminist literary technique has given space to the 'other' women characters to articulate their experience, and at the same time also to define their identity. Hindu epics have always been dominated by male characters, whereas few of the women characters who are visible in the narratives exist as the consort of the male protagonists. Women in mythology have been defined from a male point of view, which decodes them into a binary opposition of good and evil, where a submissive or subjugated woman is privileged. Consequently, independent and strong women are marginalized or ridiculed, and these viewpoints reflect in the myths. As Kate Millet states in *Sexual Politics* (1970), "the image of woman is created by men and fashioned to suit his needs" within the patriarchal system (Millet 1970, 46). Therefore, keeping this conception in her mind, Kavita Kané through her characters subverts the power structure of a traditional mythology, and presents her woman protagonist as independent, empowered, determined and decisive.

Furthermore, since this thesis derives heavily from primary, secondary, and tertiary sources; for easier perusal of readers, important references directly cited in the chapters are mentioned at the end of each chapter under 'Works Cited'. After the conclusion, a thirteen page 'bibliography' is mentioned which refers to all the sources that has been used in writing and developing the thesis as well as materials for further reading.

**Works Cited**

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. London: Paladin, 1972.

Birch, David. *Language, Literature, and Critical Practice*. London: Routledge, 1989.

Brown, Sarah Annes. "Hail, Muse! Et Cetera: Greek Myth in English and American
    Literature". *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology*. Ed. Roger D.
Woodard. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York:
    Routledge, 1999.

Chakravarti, U. "Conceptualising Brahminical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste,
    Class and State". Economic Political Weekly, 28(14), 1933

Case, Sue Ellen. *Feminism and Theatre*. U.S.: Routledge, 1988.

Cassirer, Ernst. *Language and Myth*. Trans. Susanne K. Langer. New York: Dover
Publications    Inc., 1953.

Coupe, Laurence. *Myth*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's* Boston: Beacon
    Press,   1985.

--. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. London: The Women's Press
    1978

Dörschel, Funda Basak. "*Female Identity": Rewritings of Greek and Biblical Myths by
    Contemporary Women Writers* (dissertation). Middle East Technical University,
    2011.

Dowden, Ken. *The Uses of Greek Mythology*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Dutta, Ujjal. "Women in Bengali Fiction— An Enquiry." *Women in Fiction and Fiction
    by Women*. Ed. C. D. Narasimhaiah et. Al. Mysore: Dhvanyaloka, 1986.

Eagleton, Terry. "Literary Theory: An Introduction". *Feminist Literary Theory. A Reader*.
    Ed. Mary Eagleton. USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1986. 213-216.

Eliade, Mircea. *Myth and Reality*. Trans. Willard R Trask. New York: Harper and Row,
1963.

Fairclough, Norman. *Language and Power*. New York: Longman Inc., 1989.

Frye, Northrop. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. U.S.A.: Harcourt, Inc., 1983.

Gubar, Susan. "Mother Maiden and the Marriage of Death: Women Writers and an
      Ancient Myth." *Women Studies* 6.3, 1979.

Guerin, Wilfred L. et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. 3rdEd. New
      York:   Oxford UP, 1992.

Gullette, Alan. "Myth, Language, Thought and Reality: An Extension of the Whorfian
      Hypothesis". University of Tennessee-Knoxville: English 3330: *Linguistics*
      (December 5, 1975).  Web.20 May. 2009.

Harries, Elizabeth Wanning. T*wice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the
      Fairy Tale*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Humm, Maggie. *Feminist Criticism: Women as Contemporary Critics*. Great Britain: The
      Harvester Press, 1986.

Jones, Ann Rosalind. "Inscribing Femininity: French Theories of the Feminine". *Making
      A Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*. Eds. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn.
      London: Routledge, 1991.80-112.

Kane, Kavita. *Sita's Sister*. New Delhi: Rupa Publication2014.

--. *Lanka's Princess*. New Delhi: Rupa, 2017.

--. *Menaka's Choice*. New Delhi: Rupa Publication, 2016.

--. *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

--. *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*. New Delhi: Rupa Publication, 2017.

Kaplan, Cora. *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism*. London: Verso, 1986.

Klages, Mary. "Claude Levi Strauss: The Structural Study of Myth". *Literary Theory: A
      Guide for the Perplexed*. New Yor**k:** Continuum International Publishing Group
      Ltd, 2006.

Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1986.

Levin, Harry. "Some Meanings of Myth". *Myth and Mythmaking*. Ed. Henry A. Murray. Boston. Beacon Press, 1960. 103-114.

*---, Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985.

Marowski, Daniel. Ed. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol.36. USA: Yale Research Company, 1986.

Marshall, John. *Mohenjodaro and the Indus civilization*, London: Arthur Probsthian, 1931

Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. New York: Doubleday, 1970

Mills, Sara, et al. Feminist Readings Feminist Reading. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989.

Mori, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London: Methuen, 1985.

Moriarty, Michael. *Roland Barthes*. California: Stanford University Press, 1991.

Mukhopadhyay, Arpita. *Feminisms*. Ed. Sumit Chakrabarti. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Pvt. Limited, 2016.

Oppert, G. *The original Inhabitants of India or Bharatvarsha*, London: Westminster, 1893.

Ostriker, Alicia. "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking". Signs 8.1 (Autumn, 1982):  68-90. JSTOR. Web. 15 Dec 2013.

Pratt, Annis. *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*. USA: Indiana University Press, 1981.

Righter, Wiliam. *Myth and Literature*. London-Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975.

Rochelle, Warren G. *Communities of the Heart: The Rhetoric of myth in the fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin*. Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press, 2001.

Schorer, Mark. "The Necessity of Myth". *Myth and Mythmaking*. Ed. Henry A. Murray. New York: Beacon Press, 1960.

Sellers, Susan. *Language and Sexual Difference: Feminist Writing in France*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1991.

Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Parshley. London: Picador Classics, 1953.

Sjoo, Monica and Barbara More. *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of The Earth*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987.

Spender, Dale. *Man Made Language*. London: Routledge, 1980.

*The New Encyclopedia Britannica Macropedia*. U.S.A. Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., Vol.10 and 12, 1978.

Watts, Alan W. *Myth and Ritual in Christianity*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.

**Chapter 2**

# Resisting Sexism: Feminist Revision and Mythmaking

*Re-vision–the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival.*

—Adrienne Rich (1972, 8)

## Introduction

Revisionism according to Alicia Ostriker, is like pouring new wine in an old vessel. She suggests that myths are versatile in nature and can be altered, transposed, re-constructed into new forms. When writers appropriate the myth, the sacrosanct property of the original myth is questioned, subverted, negated, or re-told. In "Thieves of Language", Ostriker remarks,

> …old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy. They are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves, they are retrieved images of what women have collectively or historically suffered; [and] in some cases they are instructions for survival. (1986, 215)

Feminist revision is a means to look back into the history of narratives and re-construct the women characters that have been discriminated and suppressed all this while. This technique allows writers to re-read in the texts from the male cannon and expose the patriarchal ideologies hidden in them. Adrienne Rich suggests that the male ideology of female subordination is rampant in the mythical texts and such representation is damaging to the identity of women. According to her, the writer who partakes in the process revisions should be concerned about, "the wreck and not the story of the wreck/the thing itself and not the myth" (quoted in Gelpi, 1993, 314).

In Indian society myths have been subjected to multiple retellings from diverse perspectives. It has become a common practice for contemporary writers to revision the epic narratives and counter the dominant ideology exhibited by the. As Nayantara Sehgal comments on the pattern of mythical revisions,

> Through the rewriting women do, new Sitas and Savitris will arise, stripped of false sanctity, and crowned with the human virtue of courage. Then at last we will know why they did what they did, and how their lone, remote struggles can help our search for identity and emancipation. (1997, 33)

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have myriad of versions both in the mainstream as well as in the retelling from folklore. Therefore, it is important to examine the history of their retellings.

**Hindu Myths and the History of Retellings**

These epics were originally written in Sanskrit, but the exact date of their composition is unknown. Sage Vyasa is credited as the compiler of the *Mahabharata* and sage Valmiki is considered to have authored the *Ramayana*. Mythic themes have been taken, translated, and retold into the modern regional languages like Oriya, Bengali, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Santali, Marathi, Gujarati, and others. Through centuries some of these languages have accommodated more than one retelling of the epic. The word for translation in Sanskrit, is '*anubad*', which etymologically means

> saying after or again, repeating by way of explanation, explanatory repetition or reiteration with corroboration or illustration, explanatory reference anything already said...The underlying metaphor in the word '*anubad*' is temporal - to say after, to repeat - rather than spatial as in the English/ Latin word translation - to carry across (Bassnett and Trivedi, 2005: 9).

The meaning of the word '*anubad*' owes to the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* being worked and reworked by numerous writers in many modern Indian languages with various shifts in the ideology through which the gaps in the original are significantly filled and the silences are rendered voices, even great heroes turning as villains and villains as heroes.

Every retelling/rewriting thus can be viewed as translation. The type of changes made by the translator depends on many factors according to the context. In *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (2017), Henri Lefebvre formally present their theory "translation is a rewriting of an original text". According to him,

> All rewritings reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in evolution of a literature and a society. Rewriting can introduce new concepts and new genres; new devices and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation. But rewriting can also repress innovation, distort, and contain. (vii)

Camille Bulcke, a student of the *Ramayana* has counted three hundred retellings of the *Ramayana* existing in the South and Southeast Asia and Sanskrit alone has some twenty-five retellings of Ram of various narrative genres like epics, poems, old mythological stories (Ramanujan, 2004, 135). Although the *Ramayana* tradition is not just bound to India, but it spreads across the Southeast Asia. There were multiple versions of the epic from diverse places like, Tibet, Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Java, and Indonesia. Each telling has diverse perspectives, like the Jaina telling of the *Ramayana* by Vimalsuri, called *Paumacariya* (Prakrit for the Sanskrit Padmacaritra), The Thai version of the *Ramayana* called *Ramakein* and others. According to Santosh Desai the *Ramayana's* transmission took through several routes, "it travelled along three routes. First by land, the northern route took the story from Punjab and Kashmir into China, Tibet and Eastern Turkestan; by sea, it took the southern route from Gujarat and South India to Java, Sumatra and Malaysia and again by land, the eastern route from Bengal to Burma, Thailand and Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia" (1970,5). Thus, there did not exist only one version of the epic by Valmiki in Sanskrit, but variety of *Ramayana* told by writers from diverse backgrounds. Like in Krittivas's Bengali *Ramayana*, Rama's wedding is a materialized according to the Bengali culture and traditions. Similarly, Kampan's *Ramayana* also differs from that of Valmiki's as it distinctively uses South Indian folklore and other southern Rama stories into his retelling Therefore in both the versions the plot is filled with regional, traditions and imagery. Likewise, the *Mahabharata* also went through several translations, telling and re-telling. Kabi Sanjay translated it into Bengali in 15th century and Ezhuthachchan wrote the *Mahabharatam kilippattu* in Malayalam also in

15th century. Sarala Das retold the epic in Oriya in 15th century, Nannayya, Tikanna and Yerrana in Telugu in 11th, 13th, and 14th centuries respectively, and Pampa in Kannada in 10th century are a few other examples.

The Indian historian Romila Thapar has this to say about the diverse telling of the *Ramayana*,

> The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations which changed the conceptualization of character, event and meaning. (Richman 1992, 72)

Paula Richman suggested that every retelling has a relationship with their regional religious, social, and political contexts. This further means that all the retellings have different perspectives for different communities. As A.K. Ramanujan opines, "some shadow of a relational structure claims the name of *Ramayana* for all these telling, but on closer look one is not necessarily all that like another" (Richman 2004, 156).

The Bhakti Movement of poetry in India saw the rise of translation of religious texts from Sanskrit to the local languages in order to blur the line between the high and the low. In the Colonial period, the theme of myth was employed by writers in their works, to revive the cultural past and to awaken a sense of Nationalism. The late colonial period saw the spate of regional literature and popular culture picking up mythic themes and appropriating them while juxtaposing both regional cultures and histories. They were read through various ideological intricacies; as an allegory of colonial oppression invoking a sense of nationalist identity, creating class consciousness, rereading through caste lenses, and interpreting through the gender and feminist point of view. Novels like M. T. Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham* (1984) in Malayalam, Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* (1984) in Oriya, V. S. Khandekar's *Yayati* (1960) in Marathi, Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjay* (1967) in Marathi, S.L Bhyrappa's Parva (1979) in Kannada are but a few examples of retellings of the source text of the *Mahabharata*.

P. Lal's 'transcreation' of the epic is another compendious work as it meticulously includes all slokas in a revised edition. It was a major project that took Lal years to complete and was published fully only by 2010. Lal called his translation a 'transcreation'

because he had added and made his own contributions to the epic while translating it. His book *Transcreation* published in 1996 describes the nature of his translation into English as 'transcreation' because it is a kind of 'cross-bearing' in view of the fact that his mother tongue is neither English nor Sanskrit but Bengali. He undertook the translation of Indian sacred texts in the hope that only that translation would enable him to know better what Indian "myth" was. (9) According to P. Lal, the translator is free to depart from the original to speak to his contemporaries because he thinks that one is always translating only for one's contemporaries. The author has thus successfully placed the translator in the position of a servant who serves time and also, he recognizes the necessity of more and more translations with the change of time and place. Again, he says,

> "[. . .] I have kept the spirit of the contemporary age very much in mind because I strongly believe that a translator speaks only to his contemporaries, unlike the creative writer who may speak to succeeding ages as well. Every text of high imagination deserves to be freshly translated for every generation." (65)

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have added to the cultural vibrancy of the country and have integrated into the ethos of India so deeply that it represents the collective unconscious of the people of the country. The ageless quality of their appeal, their influence on the ethical, moral, and religious values have shaped the very foundation of the rich and living culture of India. The narratives have been instrumental in spreading lessons on various aspects of life like statecraft, conduct, family, and societal values. It exhibited the proper conduct one should follow during the times of crisis, and transmitted values by eliminating all kinds of extravagance. Besides, both the epics are considered as the narrative device to teach philosophy. On one hand, the *Ramayana* falls under the conformist narrative because it endorses the norms through its characters like, the ideal son, ideal husband, and ideal wife. On the other hand, the *Mahabharata* is considered a non-conformist narrative because of its portrayal on the subject of, marriage, births, ritual, and Draupadi's polyandrous marriage (Jain 2011, 27).

The Hindu psyche interprets the *Ramayana* as a model for appropriate behaviour. The larger-than-life characters of Ram, Lakshman and Hanuman, and their tales of glory from the myth has become an exemplary guide to morality. Consequently, since time immemorial, this codified manuscript has captured the imagination of the Hindus as being an inviolate and unchallenged paradigm of beliefs and ideals. This view is substantiated

by Sri Aurobindo'sobservation on the two epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* that, "they are not only great poems but *dharmashatras*[2],… and their effect and hold on the mind and the life of people have been so great that they have been described as the Bible of the Indian people"(1954, 322). Hence, the *Ramayana* enjoys a cardinal position in the Hindu culture and has eventually established itself as a societal paradigm disseminating an 'ideology' in the social subconscious. The inherent ideology with a politico-cultural plan and strategy crafted within the patterned mythology into being authoritarian with time. Although there are numerous telling and variants of the epic, yet Valmiki's *Ramayana* holds an impression in the popular imagination. Most scholars agree that Valmiki's text is the earliest account on the life of Rama and has an enormous influence in India, and beyond. It is considered as one of the most prestigious texts in India and has equally drawn attention from western scholars. To summarize, Valmiki's *Ramayana*, with its enormous influential status has emerged as an authoritative text in India.

**The Veil of Morality**

As mentioned earlier, the *Ramayana* is interpreted as a blueprint for moral conduct, which specifically distinguishes between moral and immoral behaviour by the common people of India. Morality plays an important theme within the epic and it classifies the characters into reductive good and bad categories. Typically, Valimiki's *Ramayana* is a eulogy based around the archetypal hero Ram and his tales of galore, his strength, virility and righteous leadership. He is the ideal son, ideal husband and an ideal king and his virtues is a mirror to the Hindu culture and civilisation. But the epic gives voice to all the male characters extensively detailing the trials and tribulations of their lives while mostly remaining silent to the mental upheaval faced by its women characters, starting from Sita and Urmila to Ahalaya and Sabari.  The text exalts men and their perspectives on morality and incarcerates women to a definite role of subservience. Taking into account the gender norms specific to the context, the text can be interpreted as being predisposed towards patriarchal edicts which is normative under the circumstances. This chapter closely

---

[2]*Dharmashatras* are law books for Hindus which comprises collection rules and regulations for right course of conduct in dilemma

analyses two of the epic's major yet suppressed characters, Sita and Surpanakha, who represent the two ends of a woman's characterisation, universally being given the superficial status of good and bad. On one hand, Sita popularly evokes the image of a pure wife and caring mother who was subjected to multiple trials to prove her chastity and honour. She undertook these ordeals with full courage and successfully passed them. But despite of her innocence she was banished from the kingdom on the suspicion of adultery. Sita is considered to be the epitome of ideal womanhood because she unquestionably obeyed the orders of her husband. Her subordinate and self-sacrificing nature is interpreted as the ideal behaviour a woman must pursue. On the contrary, Surpanakha is commonly perceived as an evil, ugly, impure and insubordinate woman who was mutilated for expressing her sexual desire towards Ram. She transgressed the social border of conceived femininity by expressing her sexual desires which was unacceptable for a woman to exhibit. Furthermore, because of such conduct Surpanakha's mutilation has been justified on ethical grounds as a punishment to a woman, who is shameless and immodest. Her mutilation was also no less than a trial. Surpanakha embodies the label of the 'bad' woman of Indian culture who in contrast to the character of Sita, a dutiful wife who easily succumbs to subjugation, is enormously bold. Both these characters and their actions were controlled by men and were eventually believed to be the typical prototype of good and bad women in the Hindu society. Moreover, from a cultural perspective these tests and trials shed light on Hindu attitudes towards female sexuality and the dichotomous relationship between good and bad.

For 21st century educated women emulating the character of Sita is difficult to imagine. Her docile and subordinate nature would be unacceptable by women today, who are independent and are capable to voice their opinions. Sita's submission to the trials and banishment without any revolt is considered as her failure to establish an identity of her own within the text. On the other hand, Surpanakha when voiced out her views independently was perceived to be provocative and thus punishing her was justifiable. She has been reinforced time and again as an example of a wicked woman in the Hindu culture, which has stayed rooted in our consciousness even today. Therefore, to imagine oneself in the persona of Surpankha is a violation of the conceived idea of womanhood. Deducing these characters into exemplary good or bad certainly conveys an inherent ideology of the patriarchal structure for women to function from, yet there are endless retellings of the *Ramayana* in Sanskrit, English and other vernacular languages

reinterpreting the female characters, and creatively altering the text with suitable mythic structures to offer fresh perspectives, devoid of any gender discrimination. Works by poets, writers like Chandrabati, C. N Sreekantan Nair, Snehalata Reddy, Kumaran Aasan, Ranganayana Kamma, Volga, Devdutt Pattnaik, Polie Sengupta and Kavita Kane have reinterpreted the narratives of Sita and Surpanakha, offering them a voice to articulate their points of view. These reinterpretations have also renounced the traditional portrayals of these characters to suit the present sensibilities.

This Chapter thus, by rejecting the perceived normativity of the Hindu society, attempts to give a voice to both Sita and Surpanakha, whose roles have been only to magnify the heroism of the male characters. It also examines the labels associated with the two women characters, and argues that both of them were victims of a patriarchal tradition and their journeys in the *Ramayana* has been equally agonizing for both, even though one is labelled all good, and the other, all bad. Furthermore, this chapter discusses in detail the revisionist texts written by authors in order to blur the lines of good and bad woman labelled by patriarchy through the prototype, Sita and Surpanakha.

**Deconstructing the Image of Sita**

*"Among the first-rate, man's life is fame, woman's life is love. Woman is man's equalonly when she makes her life a perpetual offering, as that of man is perpetual action."*

*(Beauvoir 1952, 742)*

In *Ramayana*, Sita is considered good, pure, auspicious, and subordinate, and an epitome of womanly virtues, faithfulness and purity. She is the chaste 'good' woman whom all women should seek to emulate. Though, Sita is an active agency in the narrative yet the text hardly gives her any noticeable space to voice her opinions. Moreover, all through the text she is described as a woman who dutifully plays the role of a daughter, wife and mother. The social structure portrayed in the text offers men superior and women subordinate positions. The ideals embedded in the *Ramayana* emphasises men as the law makers, who simultaneously protect and control women both mentally and physically.

Whereas the women are offered a self-effacing pativratra[3] image, succumbing to the whims of their husbands. Similarly, Sita is considered the exemplary of an ideal woman who devoted her life to her husband Ram. One of the critical comments which can explicate this statement is, "…Sita is the noblest flower of Indian womanhood, devoted to her lord in thought, word and deed… There can be no better text-book of morals which can be safely placed in the hands of the youths to inspire them to higher and nobler ideals of conduct and character" (Iyengar, 27). Therefore, the popular patriarchal imagination defines Sita as 'the ideal woman' who without any resistance obeyed her husband's orders. She is believed to represent the perceived quality of ideal womanhood, limited to the role of a self-sacrificing wife and mother, and who unquestioningly submits to the brahmanical diktats of trials and tribulations by fire to prove her purity.

Valmiki's *Ramyana*, when interpreted from a feminist lens, suggests a deeper anxiety about women through the depiction of Sita. Though considered ideal, Sita had to withstand the tyrannical conducts of Ram, which can be found in the following three incidents — first was the *agni-pariksha*[4] or fire ordeal which Sita had to undergo as a test of chastity, after the end of the war between Ram and the demons. Second is the abandonment of Sita, described in the final book of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. After returning to Ayodhya and spending few years together, Ram decides to banish Sita — despite Sita being innocent and despite of her being in an advanced stage of pregnancy – the decision being taken after she was questioned about her chastity by some of his fellowmen. Ram being the *maryadapurush,* the ideal king and ruler, had to abide by what his citizens said, in spite of his heart telling him otherwise. And the final act of rejection was Ram's proposition that Sita should endure one more fire trial before being allowed to stay with him in Ayodhya. By then Sita had already been living in the forest and raising their sons to young manhood by herself. Sita was incessantly subjected to suspicion and she bowed to her husband's will to such an extent where she surrendered herself to prove her innocence. But this time she rejects her husband's order and instead calls upon Mother Earth to open up and embrace her within her bosom. The Earth opens and Sita returns to the womb from where she was once found and had then begun her earthly journey. She thus rests in her mother's womb securely. These episodes have been subjected to criticism

---

[3]In Hindu culture the term *Pativrata* is a characteristic considered to be imbibed by every married woman. It means a virtuous wife who vows to protect her husband all her life and also to remain devoted to him.
[4] Agnipariksha was a trial by fire that Sita had to endure to prove her chastity to her husband.

by many scholars and many devotional *Ramayana* from the 12<sup>th</sup> Century on excluded the episode of Sita's abandonment. Like both Kamban and Tulsidas closes the story with the golden age of Ram's reign, with the glorified image of Ram and Sita sitting next to each other on the throne surrounded by gods, relatives, and devotees. Besides, critics have attacked the intentions of Ram, who though perceived as the ideal man could not treat Sita with respect, and these three episodes question his god-like image. B. R Ambedkar has criticised the conduct of the popular defied figure of Ram in his work *Riddles of Hinduism* published by the Maharastra government in 1988 as, "Rama was not an ideal husband. His treatment of Sita was in fact extremely cruel. He even puts her through an *agni-pariksha* and later abandons her in the forest, with no thought of the fact that she is pregnant'' (Balarama, 1988, 28).  In similar fashion, other than Ambedkar, many social reformers like Mahatma Jyotibhai Phule, Bhaskarrao Jadhav and leaders of the Satyasodhakk and Lokhitwadi movements, were also critical of Ram's unfair behaviour towards his wife.

The Ram myth has been practised for generations by the patriarchal *bhraminical* system to create an ideal Hindu male.  Likewise, Sita too is perceived as the ideal Hindu female to serve the women as a model to be followed and become like her. Although Sita's married life can hardly be considered happy but she remains to be the ideal one as she accepts all the injustices silently. This *pativrata* image of Sita has been endorsed by many as a true identity of any Hindu woman. The ideals associated with the word mother and wife have been socially oppressive towards women by the staunch patriarchal systems which believe that the ultimate goal of womanhood is the divine talent of "self-effacing love" that women should imbibe. One of the booklets published by the Ramakrishna Mission named *The Indian Ideal of Womanhood* (1966) states,

> The ideals of chastity and purity, unselfishness and service, simplicity and modesty, have been pursued by our women, drawn by that vision of innate divinity ... The Indian woman cannot jump out of this inheritance of hers. Warned Swami Vivekananda ... "Any attempt to modernise our women, if it tries to take our women from the ideal of Sita, is immediately a failure, as we see every day. The women of India must grow and develop in the footprints of Sita, and that is the only way" (Allen and Mukherjee 1982, 10-16).

The image of Sita's fire ordeal also represents the ancient *brahminical* practice of *sati*, the act of self-immolation that was practised in 19<sup>th</sup> century India by Hindu widows at the

funeral pyre of their husbands. The widows who surrendered themselves to the blazing fire were given the status of goddesses (*Satimatas*) — apotheosized after the heroic self-sacrifice and were widely worshipped. In both the *agnipariksha* episode and the sati practice, a woman's body presumably passes through a prism of sexual and psychological purity. Both the cases idealize the wife-immolation practice as an act of extreme devotion to one's husband. This fervent devotion focusing on husbands by their wives flourished in the Hindu community to such an extent that it has become a norm for women to remain devoted to their husbands, irrespective of any atrocity, to keep up the pretence of a *good* marriage. Thus *Ramayana*, in this fashion becomes a normative text and each segment of the text is definitively justified by the traditional patriarchal system. Steve Derne reports an interview with a middle-class man Gopal Das in Banaras, who commented on the fire ordeal act as a model of how an ideal wife should behave, "Rama gave Sita the test of fire to show people that Sita had remained virtuous.... If Sita had been impure ..., she would have burned instantly in the fire. But Sita did not burn. She was saved, proving the rightness of her" (1995, 192).

Consequently, Indian patriarchal traditions have used the Sita myth to confine women within a system of subservience, obedience, and self-effacement. But down the years, the myth has also been used as a tool to empower Sita in many alternative retellings. The original epic has not given much space for its women characters to speak. It has not given them any heroic values, they are always depicted as helpless creatures that are abducted, or molested, or pawned in one way or other and are always in need of dire assistance from their male counterparts. However, by borrowing the traditional narrative from poet Vakmiki, many writers have retold the *Ramayana* to give a voice to Sita by offering her a space to narrate her part of the story. Literary works like, Chandrabatis's 16th century Bengali *Ramayana*, or *RanganayanaKamma' Ramamayana Vishavriksham* in 1974 or the folktales and songs recited by women from the periphery of India have kept alive Sita's turmoil, and have shed tears on her sufferings, loneliness and sorrow.

Chandrabati was the first woman poet of medieval Bengal to rewrite the *Ramayana*, her narrative did not praise Ram, and instead it was about Sita. She critiqued Ram's behaviour towards Sita from a woman's perspective. Nabaneeta Dev Sen in her article *Rewriting the Ramayana: Chandrabati and Molla* (1997), states that Chandrabati's Ram "is a traitor in love, unjustly banishing his pregnant wife ... a poor king, a poor elder

brother who bullies his loyal younger brother into acting against his own conscience, a poor father who does not carry out his parental responsibilities . . . most of all a poor husband-sending Sita into exile partly as a result of his jealousy of Ravana" (1997, 172). Chandrabati also uses epithets like 'sinner' and 'stone-hearted' to describe Ram. Likewise, Ranganayakamma's *Ramayana Vishvriksham* (a poisonous tree) has retold the epic from a Marxist point of view by attacking on the ideals of the 'Holy Book'. She has observed that the *Ramayana* supports male chauvinism, and she has stressed on rejecting the text in one of the chapters from her retelling, "Why should we reject the culture of Ramayana?" Nabaneeta Dev Sen has extensively worked on women folk traditions and has highlighted the diverse folklore by women who share an alternative understanding and reception of Ram's treatment towards Sita. In the article *When Women Retell the Ramayana* (2016) she has complied folk songs sung by women from villages in four different languages, Bengali, Marathi, Maithili and Telegu. She further addresses that the women use Sita as a mask, a persona to give themselves a voice by critiquing the patriarchy prevalent in their lives. She states that, "In the women's folk tradition of India, never mind where you are, which century you belong to or what language you speak, you are all sisters in sorrow" (2016, 19). In these retelling, Sita is not a rebel but she is still a suffering wife, but she speaks of her sufferings, of her injustices, loneliness and sorrows. These songs display that a woman has no social identity of her own and it is her husband who lends his identity which she has to wear as a mask, or display as a façade to establish her existence. These songs also convey the neglect and denial of their rights as women and wives, identifying their lives with that of Sita's. In one of the Marathi songs collected and translated by Dev Sen, where a pregnant Sita is banished to forest from the kingdom, a blackberry bush laments on the destitute state of Sita:

> "Sita is nine months pregnant and in forest exile.
>
> Because Sita is a woman she
>
> had to face such rejection, such neglect
>
> And so much pain,
>
> Because Sita is a woman...
>
> Ram, just because some wild people talked

You have sent virtuous Sita into the forest!" (2016, 26)

Here in this song, nature is perceived to be sympathizing with Sita, as she shares an umbilical relationship with nature. She is the daughter of Mother Earth, an embodiment of nature. She appeared from the earth, from the furrow of the field and in the end, she disappeared into the earth and had also spent most of her life in forests. These exile songs describe the traumatic conditions of a pregnant Sita who was abandoned during the times of her distress and thrown out of her home by her husband. For e.g., another Maithili song describes the heartrending account of Sita's birthing:

"Sita leaves the palace, opening the

golden gates.

Sita walks to her forest exile

Girls, exile is written for Sita.

Sita goes one mile, she goes two

miles, girls,

In the third mile the pain arises.

Now life wishes to be born, girls,

Call the midwife, quick!

The tree came out of the forest.

So, you are my friend, my well-wisher?

You take my golden bangle then,

And cut the cord of the baby...

Alas! If only Ram would understand!" (2016, 25)

A review of relevant literature shows that there are many subversive and counter-traditional retellings and critical treatments of *Ramayana*. In recent days, novels, poems, plays and dances have sought to imagine Sita as a character not robbed of her voice by the patriarchal tradition, but as a woman of substance, with a mind of her own. There are

several indications of Sita's power and courage in the traditional text which has heralded the imagination of a different Sita. Bina Aggarwal's poem "Sita speak your side of the story. We know the other side too well…" in the year 1985 highlights the injustices towards Sita. It attempts to bring forth the silenced voice of Sita with young women of the twentieth century appealing her to open her heart and tell her story. To which Sita renders her agony,

> "…to patience too there is a limit. Again, and again the same insult, the same doubt. Once I took the trial by fire. Now again he demanded the same trial, in front of my young sons, in front of the whole court. 'Prove your purity, because some people still have doubts about you.' You tell me, was there any other way to save myself from this? No. If I spoke out, who would listen? No more. I went back where I had come from, to the lap of my mother".

At last she finds peace in the womb of her Mother earth where nothing mortal will ever reach her. In a similar way, Kumaran Assan's poem, *The Brooding Sita*, (1919) criticizes Ram's behaviour towards his wife and dismisses all the justifications presented in his defence. Here Sita breaks her silence and asserts herself fiercely before perishing into the earth. Sita is seen to be asserting her individuality while deliberating over Ram's offer of returning to Ayodha only by going through another *agni-pariksha*. She cries out, "What? Does the emperor think that I should once more go into his ... presence and once again prove myself...? Do you think I am a mere doll? ... My mind and soul revolt at the very thought..." (Shreekala 7).

Snehalata Reddy's one act play *Sita*, written in 1973, radically subverts the episode of fire. Here in this retelling Sita with bitterness reacts fiercely when Ram wants her to go through the first round of *agni-pariksha*. She vocalizes the humiliation that she has to face, condemns the culture which has always glorified her sufferings, and conceals the sins of patriarchy with stories of her submissiveness and devotion. She also speaks to the women of future generations and suggests them to fight back, and not submit to any injustice which women since centuries are condemned to face in the name of *dharma*. Sita finally rejects Ram,

> RAMA: … Come to your senses! … My word is law! ... I cannot take it back! ... If you do not do your duty, I must reject you!

SITA: (fiercely) How dare you! It is I who reject you! (40-41)

Sita's ordeals are popularly perceived as an act of humble surrender to the impulses of an irrational, but self-righteous husband, but she is needed to be understood more sensitively, rather than simply as a devoted and pliant wife. As Madhu Kishwar suggests in her article "Yes to Sita, No to Ram" (1997) published in the journal *Manushi,* that Sita is not a foolish woman who submits to the ill-treatment done by her husband silently. Kishwar opines that popular perception of *agni-pariksha* was, "an act of supreme defiance on (Sita's) part which shows her husband to be unjust and foolish in doubting a woman like her". She appears from the fire as a woman whom even *Agni* (fire god) — who has the ability to burn anything - dare not harm.  The refusal of Sita to go for a second *agni-pariksha* demanded by Ram is interpreted as an act of dignified rejection of Ram as a husband. She refuses to comply with his undue demand of a final fire-trial and refuses to come back and live with him. Though she rejects the fire ordeal but still she is considered the foremost of the *mahasatis* and the rejection leaves Ram grieving for Sita.

In one of the instances from Kalidasa's *Raghuvansha*, after Sita is banished by Ram, she never refers to Ram as *Aryaputra* (a term for husband which translates as the son of my father-in-law.) but instead refers to him as the 'king'. Ram's conduct towards his wife, by banishing her and subjecting her to go through all the trials and tribulations is popularly considered as the *dharma* of a king, but in an endeavour to appease his countrymen he forsook the *dharma* of a husband.  Whereas Sita's sense of *dharma* is observed to be superior to Ram's; all through the text she follows her *dharma* of being a good wife. She is the woman who even gods revere, a woman who refuses to comply with her husband's unjustified demand for a second fire-trial, while still remaining loyal to him till the end. Characterising Sita as the ideal wife does not endorse a husband's right to behave unjustly to his wife. And conforming to the status of ideal wife also does not glorify embracing all the insults graciously by a woman in the name of duty. Sita herein could be regarded not as a slavish wife but as a woman who puts the ideal man to shame.

**Surpanakha: The Silenced Voice**

In stark contrast to Sita's ideal personification in popular imagination is the character of Surpanakha, the evil incarnate. Down the ages, authors and writers, both in literary and popular fiction have majorly painted Surpanakha in a completely black hue. Artistes have always represented her as wicked and profane whenever she is subjected to a critical analysis. Even though the Surpanakha episode from the *Ramayana* is considered integral to the main story, Surpanakha is considered a marginal character in the whole epic. In traditional narratives and in popular imagination, she is characterised as an immodest, monstrous and impure woman because of her progressive stances and her audacity of transgressing the societal markers of conceived femininity. Her liberated views and overt expression of sexuality are highly criticised. The patriarchal shackles censures Surpanakha and unjustly mutilates her for her dominion. Moreover, the act of mutilation is clarified as a righteous punishment for women's sexuality when left unchecked by male control.

In Valmiki's *Ramayana* the episode of Surpanakha's mutilation opens with Ram, Lakshman and Sita spending blissful days in exile at the Panchavati forest. One day a rakshasi[5] named Surpanakha happens to pass by and sees Ram and is immediately bestowed with his handsome figure and splendour. Valmiki contrasts her appearance with Ram's:

> His face was beautiful; hers was ugly. His waist was slender; hers were 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 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. (Erndll 1992, 69)

The given description pictures Surpanakha as the evil incarnate whose appearance is completely hideous in contrast to Ram's magnificence. Furthermore, it mocks Surpanakha for her audacity to desire Ram; she is objectified in terms of her repugnant appearance including her physical hideousness and deformities and juxtaposed with that of Ram's allure.

---

[5]In Hinduism a malignant female demon is called rakshasi.

Seized with desire for such appealing manhood, Surpanakha approaches Ram who was in the guise of an ascetic and enquires about their reasons of staying in a forest frequented by *rakshasas*. In reply, Ram introduces himself, his wife and his brother and remarks, "For with your charming body you do not look like a *rakshashi*" (Pollock 1991). She responds that she is a *rakshashi* named Surpanakha wand is also a shapeshifter. This exchange raises question on Surpanakha's appearance. Although Valmiki describes Surpanakha as hideous and repulsive yet Ram's remark of her 'charm' can be suggestive of her having changed her form to appear desirable to Ram. Furthermore, this scene also puts a question on Ram's remark on her beauty, whether it is serious or sarcastic, because Valmiki's description refers either to Surpanakha 'true' form or her 'apparent' form. This situation thus hints at ambiguity of the language used while introducing Surpanakha to the readers.

Surpanakha also goes on to describe her family lineage, her brothers - King Ravan, the mighty but hibernating Kumbhakarna, virtuous Vibhishan - and her ability to defy all of them, boasting of her power. Wracked by lust she now expresses her sexual overtures towards Ram and invites him to be her husband. Ram is amused with this blatant offer and declines it by calling himself a one-woman man, married to Sita. He claims that "the rivalry between co-wives would prove unbearable." Instead he diverts her attention to brother Lakshman,

> "My younger brother however who is of a happy disposition, of agreeable appearance, virtuous and chaste, is called Lakshman and is full of vigour. He has not yet experienced the joys of a wife's company and desire a consort. He is youthful and attractive and would therefore be a fitting husband for thee" (Shastri 1952, 3: 40-1)

Lakshman on the other hand, evades this offer by directing her back towards Ram suggesting that he was just a mere servant to his brother Rama, and she deserves better, so she must convince Rama. He jokes that Ram will surely renounce the ugly, peevish woman with deformed limbs, with reference to Sita, and accept her. He addresses her beauty as unparalleled to any ordinary woman like Sita. (Shastri 3: 41). From the above statements it is clear that both Ram and Lakshman were not interested in Surpanakha whether for matrimony or for sexual gratification, but instead of dismissing her immediately they banter about her apparent charm and good looks. They laugh and poke fun at her. This possibly reflects a male anxiety about her overt sexuality as both Ram and

Lakshman were intimidated by her bold nature. Moreover, Surpankha fearlessly roams in the jungle all by herself and overtly expresses her sexuality to show a strong independent side to her which is unacceptable in Hindu [6]*dharma*. The *dharma* rejects nature's wild side and regulates primal instincts and violence and domesticates fertility to establish a stable society. The *rakshasas* on the other hand are despised because they reject *dharma* and support the *matsya nyaya*, the law of the jungle (Pattanaik 2000, 87). Likewise, Surpankha followed the law of jungle and expected Ram and Lakshman to respond to her solicitations. But *dharma* does not endorse her free-ways, in the Rig Veda, there are references that women should be, "rendered powerless by ensuring that they do not gain in strength and are obedient to men and follow them" (Chakravarti, 581). In addition to her bold introduction, Surpanakha transgresses the gender boundary by expressing her desire for both the men which is indecorous of any woman. Her nonconformity to laws of *dharma* is perceived as a threat to the society. Therefore, women expressing their desires are looked down upon as threats and a woman's sexuality can only be validated when acknowledged by a man. Surpanakha is labelled as the 'bad woman' of the Hindu society, her overt sexuality and independence is discerned as threatening but also holds "certain fascination for the male imagination" (Erndl, 84), which may be the reason for both Ram and Lakshman to be engaging in prolonged conversation with her, bantering with her rather than banishing her immediately.

When Surpanakha realised that both the brothers were mocking her, in the rage of rejection and humiliation, she tried to attack and harm Sita, to which Ram ordered Lakshmana to teach the 'unvirtuous' Surpanakha a lesson she will never forget, "It is unwise to taut those beings who are vile and cruel, O Saumitri, Take heed, see, Vaidehi is in danger, Friend! Do thou maim this hideous demon of protruding belly, who is evil and filled with fury" (Shastri 1952, 3:42) Lakshmana then proceeds and mutilates Surpanakha's nose and ears. Furthermore, screaming in pain and bleeding profusely, Surpanakha ran fanatically to her brother Ravan who tries to avenge her dishonour by abducting Sita.

---

[6]Dharma is a concept core to Hinduism and it believes in fulfilling one's duty according to the customs and laws. Lord Rama is considered the epitome of Dharma, a righteous king who abides by the law and this attribute makes him the ideal man to be admired.

Although the apparent reason for Surpanakha's disfigurement was to protect Sita, but it can also be assumed that Ram's intention was to punish Surpanakha for her sinful desires, and for expressing those desires blatantly. In some other versions of *Ramayna*, Lakshman also lacerates her breasts, hands, feet, and even hair as well (Bulcke 1975, 414). Erndl in her article, *The Mutilation of Surpanakha* (1992) writes that in South India, breasts represent the characteristic of female power and cutting them off is a punishment which dispossess women of power. Similarly, nose is a symbol of honour and mutilating the nose of Surpanakha significantly reflects the removal of her honour, since for a woman her honour is associated with sexual purity. In traditional gender roles women's subservience towards their fathers, brothers and husbands is considered an auspicious quality but Surpanakha's disobedience with Hindu code of womanhood is distinguished as a heinous crime which was needed to be fixed. Surpanakha crossed the gender boundary by expressing her desire and voicing her views to which disfigurement became the rightful punishment for her transgressions. There are versions of the epic that justify this mutilation on ethical grounds - a woman like Surpanakha who is shameless, brutal, impure and immodest, deserves such a punishment.

The tale of the *Ramayana* upholds several ambiguous dichotomies between the good and the evil, the pure and the impure, and the male and the female. But with the evolving feminist consciousness many recent post-modern retellings have attempted to blur these dichotomies and question the very foundation of categorizing women into such specific brackets. The epic *Ramayana* silenced Shurpanakha, disfigured and humiliated her and gave no space to express her part of the story but recently there have been few retellings which have spoken in her favour and given her voice to articulate her experience.

Polie Sengupta's play, *Thus Spake Shoorpankha, So Said Shakuni* (2001) speaks respectively about two of the most villainous characters from the epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* - Surpankha and Shakuni. This play subverts the traditional narrative, rather gives them voice to express their part of the story. The play uses technique of revisionist mythmaking and gives voice to the unheard characters. The play retells the epics in a contemporary situation with the help of two characters (Man and Woman) who are icons of the two villainous characters from the respective epics, minor in the overall context of the epics, yet pivotal to the central storyline. Both the characters in the play are involved

in a conversation with each other recollecting the distasteful memories which made them the cause of destruction in both *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The Woman first disclosed her identity as 'Shoorpanakha' saying, "It's my story. (Pause.) I was her." (255). She narrated the episode of her mutilation from her point of view. She describes that while Ram, Sita and Lakhshmana were in exile dwelled in the forest, she unapologetically expressed her love and sexual desire for Rama first and then to Lakshmana, but both the brothers declined her offer.

> WOMAN: You know what they did to me…the two brothers…they laughed. Laughed at me. They teased me. Mocked me. The older one said, ask my brother…he might want you…the younger one said…I can't marry without my brother's consent…ask him…They tossed me this way and that, as if…as if I did not deserve any more respect. As if I were a broken plaything. (261)

The ridiculous behaviour of the two brothers and the chopping off her nose, ears and breasts enraged Surpanakha, when all she wanted was, 'I wanted love…just a little love…for a little while' (262). In the entire epic, Surpanakha is labelled as a woman of loose character and disfigurement became a justified punishment for her transgressions. But the play suggests that history has not been kind to her and has not given her justice, and she desires for a justified place for her within the epic. The play ends with Surpanakha questioning the principle behind disfiguring a defenceless woman.

> WOMAN: What was Shoorpanakha's crime? That she approached a man with sexual desire? Shoorpanakha merely wanted love. (277)

> They assaulted a defenceless woman. (278)

Another revisionist retelling, *Lankas's Princess* (2017) by Kavita Kane is a coming-of-age-story of the unheeded character of Surpanakha, Ravana's sister. Here, Surpanakha is a strong independent woman who breaks the diktats of the patriarchal society by voicing out her views and making choices. But her liberated attitude is questioned and punished by the society. She has been a victim in the hands of a gender-biased society where her actions are rigorously checked by men. This novel narrates the plight of Surpanakha, from a young girl ignored and scorned for her appearance by her family, to a self-sufficient adult rejecting the norms set by her brothers on her, for which she is ultimately punished by a highly judgemental society. But she unshackles herself from the clutches of the

traditional gendered structures of the Hindu society and asserts herself by challenging the moral dictums.

Amit Chaudhuri's short story 'Surpanakha', published in *The Little Magazine* (Looking Back, Vol.2, II) is another creative re-interpretation of the episode of Surpnakha's mutilation and reconstructs it to provide a compassionate portrayal of Surpanakha. It narrates the heartless act of the two brothers who played with her like a toy, throwing her back and forth between themselves. In addition, the plot inverts the conventional romantic narrative, with a lovelorn Surpanakha stalking Ram, desperate for his company. In contrast Ram for the very first-time experiences "the dubious and uncomfortable pleasure of being the object of pursuit" of a woman (ibid, 2). Surpanakha appears in the guise of a beautiful woman and offers herself to Ram, who could sense that she was a *rakshashi* in the form of a lustrous woman. He tells Lakshamana, "this beautiful 'maiden' smells of *rakshasi*; look at the gawky and clumsy way she carries her body." She tries to convince him to spend time with her, but Ram had his intention of making fun of her as a commodity of amusement. Ram whispers to Lakshman, "Let's have some fun with her." Wandering in exile in the forest for long years had been a monotonous ritual for Ram and thus the presence of Surpankaha becomes a mode of entertainment for him. Amused and seemingly flattered, Ram plays along for a while but soon becomes tired of her and turns to Lakshman saying, "This creature's beginning to tire me. Do something" and with cruelty asks Lakshman to punish her for her brazenness. Ram tells Laksman viciously, "Something she'll remember for days, teach her a lesson for being so forward" (2). Though in the play the act of mutilation is not clearly showed yet it can be understood that Surpanakha was disfigured as she was screaming in pain and bewilderment. She pondered that, "the one she'd worshipped should be so without compassion, so unlike what he looked like" (2). The story ends with Surpanakha searching for Ravan.

By an analysis of these retellings, it is thus identified that the writers have tried to reconstruct the traditional narrative of the Surpanakha episode and have attempted to dive deep into the psyche of Surpankha. Surpankha out of love and lust offers her companionship to Ram and expresses her desire which according to the Hindu ideals of womanhood is disgraceful. For women, sexuality should be repressed and when Supankha expresses desires that do not comply to the 'Hindu standards,' she is punished for her audacities. Women are supposed to be protected from impurity through the strict control

of marriage and Surpanakha's audacious proposal was disturbing for both Ram and Lakshman. Yet they keep on egging her, having prolonged conversations with her rather than banishing her immediately. But, later, her sexual overtures were condemned, and her voice was forcefully muted through physical disfigurement. Disfigurement becomes her punishment for transgressing the border of sexuality. Moreover, her bold personality was immediately marked out as bad and dishonourable. But when looked through Surpankha's perspective, she represents an independent, free and bold woman who repudiates the irrational regulations imposed on women by a prejudiced and patriarchal society.

**Sita and Surpanakha: Female Solidarity**

The image of Sita would be incomplete without the image of Surpanakha, as both of them exemplify two types of women of the Hindu society. They are portrayed in contrast to each other; one is virtuous, pure, and good, while the latter is sinful, impure and bad. Sita exhibits subservient and self-effacing qualities which are expected of a woman to inculcate. On the contrary, Surpanakha expresses her desires and is not subjected to any control. Both the women according to popular imagination portray what to be, and what not to be. Although, Sita confines herself within the patriarchal regulations and Surpanakha rejects it, but both had to endure severe trials and punishment. The judgement passed on them when viewed through the lens of feminist studies, exposes the ambiguity the Hindu society exhibits on female sexuality

Volga's retelling, *The Liberation of Sita* (2016) translated from Telegu by T. Vjay Kumar and C. Vijayasree subverts patriarchal structures embedded in the mythical text and empowers the marginalized female characters by offering them complete liberation. She creates a community of women by re-interpreting myths from an alternative point of view. The story 'The Reunion' narrates the story of Sita meeting Surpanakha and both of them forging a bond of sisterhood and redefining the word liberation. Sita abandoned by Ram, takes shelter in Valmiki's ashram, and devotes time in raising her two sons. She meets Shurpanakha for the second time after Shurpanakha's humiliation and mutilation. Sita assumed that after the humiliation, Shurpanakha must have been living a life of distress but to her surprise she finds that Surpanakha had recovered and had created an aura of joy

and happiness around her by immersing herself in cultivating a garden. She had strived and conquered her rage and depression and had found inspiration is nourishing her garden. After her disfigurement, she had to endure loathe and disgust, in addition to the physical agony.  Surpanakha, once a beautiful woman, had turned into an ugly and evil monster, after her mutilation. But she had erased those painful moments and had embraced the beauty of nature. She realised that beauty is not a physical attribute but the truth of nature. She found fulfilment in growing a garden which represented the beauty of nature. On listening to Surpanakha's journey, Sita not only appreciates her strength but also draws a parallel between them by saying, "Surpanakha's trial was no less than the trial by fire that I had to go through" (13). In the same manner when Surpanakha discovers that Ram had abandoned Sita, she immediately felt for Sita and questioned herself, "Was anguish inevitable for women who love Sri Ram?" (9). Here both the characters sympathise with each other which sprouted a bond of friendship between them. Surpanakha attained fulfilment in appreciating both beauty and ugliness found in nature. Having achieved a state of non-dependent joy, Surpanakha had also found male company in Sudhira who respected her wisdom and discernment. Surpanakha tells Sita, "I've realised that the meaning of success for a woman does not lie in her relationship with a man. Only after that realization, did I find this man's companionship". (13) To this Sita also learns that her fulfilment does not lie in bringing up her children but in discovering herself. The story ends with Surpanakha inviting Sita to stay with her in her garden once her children leave her. This unsolicited affection stirs a bond of sisterhood within them and Sita agrees to come back to her and "…resting under these cool trees, I shall create a new meaning of life" (15). Thus, Surpanakha inspires Sita to create an identity of her own. She explains Sita that a woman's life should not be confined only to serve the roles assigned to them by the society, rather she encourages Sita to think about herself.  Moreover, the bond of sisterhood that developed between them was not because both of them were victims of patriarchy, rather they felt connected because both of them were in the pursuit of self-realization.

The *Ramayana* had successfully labelled both the women into boxes of 'good 'and 'bad' and because the epic is still considered as a transcendental model of morality, the traditional gender structure portrayed in the text has become normative. The text offers an inherent ideology and patriarchal domination by devoicing both the characters either through trials or through mutilation. Throughout the *Ramayana* the standard of morality

has been documented through women, where women are assigned to polarities like good and bad, pure, and impure, auspicious, and inauspicious, by men. But with the alternative narratives, folk songs, and retellings, from time to time people have articulated the subservient, and critiqued the perpetrators and their code of morality. In popular imagination both Sita and Surpanakha are characterised respectively as docile and insubordinate. But when analysed through the lens of the new feminist revisionist texts on *Ramayana* we find the characters to be homologous to each other, with Sita symbolising dignity and Surpanakha symbolising freedom.

The epic *Mahabharata* also has been a subject of multiple interpretations because of its timeless significance. The text has undergone multiple adaptations interpolations, and alterations in the hands of writers to counter the hegemonic ideologies exhibited by the text. Irawati Karve's *Yuganta: The End of Epoch* (1986) is an important revisionist text which presents a sociological perspective and hints at the treatment of women in those times. She examines the characters from a humanistic perspective without attributing them with divinity. She brings forth a human dimension to the epic by analysing the characters with their emotions like fear and hope. Kevin McGrath's work *Stri: Feminine Power in the Mahabharata* (2009) is also a retelling which focuses on the women characters from *Mahabharata* like Kunti, Gandhari, Amba, Satyavati, Shakuntal, Draupadi, and Damayanti.

Modern feminist retellings of India also include texts from eminent feminists such as Mahashweta Devi. Her "Kunti and Nishadin" which was published in *After Kurukshetra* (2005), explicitly details the narratives of women who were marginalized for their caste and class. The story revisits the episode of House of Lac, which was constructed by the Kaurava Brothers for their cousins, the Pandavas and their mother Kunti. The planned to trap them inside the palace and burn it whole so as to assassinate them. However, when Kunti gets a whiff of this massive conspiracy, she invites a servant woman and her five sons and gets them drunk just before the house is set aflame. While the house was set on fire the Pandavas and Kunti managed to escape while the unnamed woman and her sons burnt alive in the structure. After this incident, the conspirators believed they were successful. In Mahashweta Devi's retelling during Kunti's *Vanvaas* (stay in the forest) she was approached by the *nishadin*, a tribal woman, who accuses her of her wrongdoing following which Kunti is consumed in fire. In the original story, Kunti is shown to be

unaware of this atrocity. By murdering an innocent woman and her sons, she could save herself and her sons. However, Mahashweta Devi's retelling subverts the original narrative and focuses on the lives of the most marginalized woman who just received a passing mention.

**Female Literary Tradition in India**

In the Indian context, feminist writings have been a quest for identity because most of the feminist writings were about women and their ignored experiences. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's work entitled *Women writing in India-600 BC to the Present* in two volumes is an important anthology that has documented writings of women in India over two millennia in different regional languages. This anthology is significant because it documented the female tradition of writing that was rejected by the patriarchal power. The work gave a platform to women who were confined to the four walls to share their experiences. It documented poetry, songs, essays, and elegies written by monks, wives, mothers, prostitutes, and others. The work includes poetries of Buddhist monks in the collection named *Therigatha* which writes about the life-changing teachings of Buddha.

This anthology also meticulously compiles works by women from the Bhakti period which were written in devotion to God, also became a medium to express their resistance. Bhakti movement heralded a new juncture where common people came together and revolted against the diktats of upper class and caste. The Bhakti movement saw the rise of writings in regional language which also broke the authority of Sanskrit. This movement is of prime importance because most Bhakti poets were women like, Meera Bai, Ratnabai, Janabai and Akkamahadevi. These women through their writing depicted a relationship with God in spiritual union, surrendering their lives in the name of God breaking the confinement of marriage and domesticity. The women writers also fearlessly wrote about the bold theme of women's pleasure. The Bhakti movement defied patriarchy through devotion. The compilation in this anthology historically documented women writers from every decade. This compilation also includes contribution of women writers in the magazines and journals during the nationalist movement where the writers addressed the double marginalized status of women. They were oppressed on two levels— as women and as colonized (Tharu and Lalita 195, 173). The works were very crucial in the tradition of feminine writing as they portrayed the struggle between home and nation. Few eminent writers during this period were Tarabai Shinde, Sarojini Naidu, Pandita Ramabai,

Savitribai Phule. Pandita Ramabai's *The High Caste Hindu Woman* and Tarabai Shinde's *Stree-Purush Tulana* were instrumental in awakening the courage to question the authoritative religious decorum, customs and myths that suppressed women. The nationalist movement gave women the freedom to express themselves through literature. There was also an upsurge of women fiction writers like Swarnakumari Devi, Krupa Sachinandan, Toru Dutt, Vimala Kapur who wrote women-centric novels during the mid-nineteenth century. Their works were women-centric where they expressed their repressed wishes and compromises that they make in their day-to-day life. These works spoke of women who attempted to move past the assigned role of a wife to creating an independent identity of self. Post-Independence women writers heralded a new feminist epistemology in Indian literary feminism. The women protagonists in their works were bold and fierce. They unapologetically discussed the gender disparities present in the society. They expressed the realities of a woman's life at her home and in detail dived into their psyche. Their works were a quest for identity and freedom. This period includes writers like, Ruth Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee Shobha De, Shashi Deshpande, Attia Hosain, Suniti Namjoshi, Namita Gokhale, Chitra Banerjee, Gita Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri are among others. These women writers came out from the confinement of the four walls and gave a feminist perspective to the idea of marriage and patriarchal setups. They wrote about joy, sorrows, loneliness, aspirations, and desires within the patriarchal control.

Indian feminism as Jasbir Jain opines, is an attempt to create an identity, freedom, and space by not being associated with resistance. It does not refute relationships but to aspire from freedom within the marital bliss. Since feminism in India is not a singular entity because it includes multiple layers like — caste, religious customs, social conditions and more than resistance it is an attempt to be heard, make choices and freely act according to the choices made (Jain 2011,4). According to her, Indo-centric feminism is mostly about self-reflection, conquering the inner fears and realising self-worth. It does not sabotage the values of a relationship, instead it tries to build a new one (ibid). The idea of feminism in India is distinctly different from the western idea of feminism. Malashri Lal in her work *The Law of the Threshold* (1995) uses the symbol of threshold to state that laws of threshold allow men to live freely whereas the laws for women allow them to confine themselves to a single space for a living (13). She further opines that there are three operational spaces of threshold according to which women exist— within the threshold,

on the threshold and outside the threshold (22). According to her, within the threshold symbolises passivity and inaction of women due to year's patriarchal dominion. Therefore, women staying under the domination accepted such hegemony and act according to the assigned roles of wife, mother, and daughter and also surrendered their bodies to the male authority (17). This confinement of women within the domestic sphere is cunningly termed by men as 'Griha Lakshmi' (13). The second space namely on the threshold, symbolises the outer world of possibilities, freedom, glory, and risks. The third and final space, outside the threshold symbolises the world beyond the confinements towards an unknown journey with no possibility of coming back. Here the women when steps out into the unknown territory in isolation with difference from those who accept passivization unquestioningly. Though mostly women in India are closely linked to their families and social community and thus they do not reject the family values instead they make rearrangements that would change the gender polarities. Similarly, the characters in Kavita Kané crosses different thresholds in their lives. Urmila crosses the threshold of the private space of domesticity in pursuit of knowledge and to become a scholar. Satyavati crosses the threshold of caste to become a queen of the Kuru dynasty, she also makes takes part in the administration of the empire. Surpanakha crosses the threshold of the perceived notions of femininity, transgresses it to express her sexual desire.

All the feminist text does not take refuge in breaking families and taking a hostile step against patriarchy. The texts mainly delve into the female spaces and without rebellion intervenes into the female psyche and lend them a voice to speak their unheard stories. The protagonists in the texts explore their 'self' and create a new identity. The women in these texts evolve from being a submissive character to a state of maturity where cognitively they can make choices for themselves. Similarly, the texts used in this thesis represent similar ethos in the protagonists— Surpanakha, Urmila, Satyavati and Menaka. These characters have crossed the threshold of the inner space of domesticity in an attempt to lead a life free from all the regulations. They made individual choices and took decision of their lives. They lived their lives according to their terms. The discovery of female self is the core to the feminist literary traditions. Women in India are addressed as 'devi' or goddess, which asserts women to be best when lived within the confinement of domesticity but with feminism this idea of viewing women as 'devi' but as 'self'. Moreover, due to ongoing patriarchal hegemony women overlook the fact that they too have their 'self' which needs to be heard. Sashi Deshpande in her essay *The Power Within*

(1996) opines that the discovery of female 'self' is not new juncture for women, but it existed even before they were assigned roles of daughter, wife and mother. Therefore, when men create women, they ignore the fact that women too have themselves selves and this pushes women to the point where they embark into the journey of discovering their female self without taking any militant steps. This rediscovery of female self is also evident similarly among the characters from the texts the present thesis deals with. The protagonists rediscover themselves and assert their identity as a woman with intellect.

According to Uma Chakravarti in her article *Conceptualising Brahminical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State*, the women in India are classified by the layers of caste and class. They do not have a singular identity of just being women, but they have to follow all societal rules, hegemony of caste and class and the stratification in the society. They were oppressed by the diktats of caste and class, the higher the caste, the patriarch dominion was greater. The *brahmanical* patriarchy-controlled women on the basis of caste and it linked a relationship between the caste and gender. It also controlled the sexuality of women in terms of the caste group they belonged. The caste system was more determined to control the sexuality of women because the notion of purity of women in higher castes is respected and women were considered the protectors of their castes but intermixing of caste was considered a sin. They controlled land, caste, and women in terms of chastity and sexuality (Chakravarti 1993, 582). *The Code of Manu in Manusmriti* also declares that women should be controlled by men because of their inherent attributes of being sinful, lusty, and angry. He further suggests that the duty of women is to surrender themselves to the control of men to keep code of conducts in check. These restraints imposed on women were considered ideal and women behaving according to the whims of her husband were appreciated. Thus, women who were docile, obedient, and devoted to their husbands were ideal and those who questioned these ideals and showed reason were heavily condemned.

The women the thesis studies have subverted all the patriarchal diktats and defined themselves as independent thinkers. They shunned the patriarchy by creating an inner space for themselves where they exercised their resistance. The characters from Kavita Kane's retelling— Satyavati and Urmila both rejected the patriarchal codes dictated by Manu, where women need to be controlled. Moreover, they were on the other hand the protector of their loved ones. They negotiate, defy norms, and actively take part into the

decision-making process. They defied the existing structure of women belonging to the four walls but stepped out in outer world which was ruled by men.

The modern retellings aim to bridge the gaps in traditional versions of Hindu epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the Ramayana. They generally develop around some of the most overlooked and underdeveloped characters and themes and are built on their caste, class, gender, and sexual identities. These narratives further enrich the Indian narratology by their flexible and fluid structure and narration. This is one of the major characteristics of this form of literature as it allows the author to bend the original narrative according to his/her whim. Modern writers often identify a minor character or theme in these epics and base their narrative from their point of view. These modifications make such ancient stories more relatable to a modern reader. In the modern world, readers are often identity conscious and challenge the age-old value systems, aesthetics and culture as a whole.

These new retellings have a special place in feminist studies as they make women who were neglected and marginalized in the original narratives their heroines. They present a meeting ground for modern feminist ideals and ancient religious tales. Rather than glorifying the male heroes of the original narratives they delve into the female psyches and narrate it from their perspective. Consequently, these narratives not only challenge the gender stereotypes but also blur the fine line associating mythology with past. The following chapters in this thesis focus on the revisionist texts by Kavita Kané featuring the side-lined characters like, Surpanakha, Urmila, Menaka and Satyavati.

## Works Cited

Allen, Michael R. *Women in India and Nepal*. Vol. 8, Australian National University
        Monograph on South Asia, 1982.

Altekar, A. S. *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: From Prehistoric Times to
        the Present Day*. 2nd ed. 1959. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 2005.

Badrinath, Chaturvedi. *The Women of the Mahabharata: The Question of Truth*. New
        Delhi: Orient Longman, 2008.

Balarama, Gunvanthi. "Casting Aspersions: Ambedkar's Riddle." *Bombay*, 22 Dec. 1988,
        pp. 27–32.

Bandlamudi, Lakshmi. *Dialogics of Self, the Mahabharata and Culture: The History of
        Understanding and Understanding of History*. London: Anthem Press-
        Wimbledon Publishing Company, 2011.

Beauvoir, Simon de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley. London:Vintage
        1997.

Bhattacharya, Ashim Kumar. *Hindu Dharma: Introduction to Scriptures and Theology*.
        Lincoln: iUniverse, 2006.

Bhattacharya, Pradip. *Panch-Kanya: The Five Virgins of Indian Epics*. Calcutta: Writers
        Workshop, 2005.

Bhawalkar, Vanamala. Woman in the Mahabharata. Delhi: Sharada Publishing

Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. London:
        Routledge, 1990.

Chakravarti, Uma. "Conceptualising Brahminical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender,
        Caste, Class and State." *Economic Political Weekly*, vol. 28, no. 14, 1993, pp.
        579–585.

Derné Steve. *Culture in Action: Family Life, Emotion, and Male Dominance in Banaras,
        India*. State University of New York Press, 1995.

Deshpande, Shashi. *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*. New Delhi:
        Viking-Penguin, 2003.

Erndl, Kathleen M. "The Mutilation of Surpanakha." *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of
        A Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, edited by Paula Richman, University of
        California Press, 1992.

Iyengar, K R.S, editor. *Asian Variations in Ramayana*. Sahitya Akademi, 1983.

Jain, Jasbir. *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency* New Delhi:
   Sage Publications, 2011.

Jain, Jasbir. *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency*.

Kakar, Sudhir and Katharina Kakar. *The Indians: Portrait of a People*. New Delhi:
   Penguin, 2007.

Kakar, Sudhir and Katharina Kakar. *The Indians: Portrait of a People*. New Delhi:

Kane, Kavita. *Lanka's Princess*. Rupa, 2017.

Kishwar, Madhu. "Yes to Sita, No to Ram: The Continuing Popularity of Sita in India."
   *Manushi 98*, 1997.

Lal, Ananda, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford

Leslie, Julia and Mary Mc Gee eds. *Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender,*

Long, Judy. *Telling Women's Lives: Subject/Narrator/Reader/Text*. New York:

McGrath, Kevin. *Strī: Feminine Power in the Mahābhārata*. New Delhi: Orient
   Blackswan, 2011.

Mitter, Sara S. *Dharma's Daughters: Contemporary Indian Women and Hind Culture*.
   New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

Olivelle, Patrick, ed. and trans. *Dharmasūtra Parallels*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass,
   2005.

Ostriker, Alicia. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*.

Pattanaik, Devdutt. *The Goddess in India: The Five Faces of the Eternal Feminine*. Inner
   Traditions International, 2000.
   Penguin, 2007.

Pollock, Sheldon. "The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India, Volume III:
   Aranyakāṇḍa." Edited by Robert P, Goldman, Princeton University Press. *JSTOR*,
   1991, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bmzkf0.

Reddy, Snehalata. "Sita." *The Other Side*, Sept. 1985, pp. 32–41.
   *Religion and Politics in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *College English* vol.
   34, no.1, 1972, pp. 18-30. JSTOR. Accessed 14 Sept. 2019.

Richman, Paula. *Many Rāmāyanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*.
   Oxford University Press, 1992.

Russ, Joanna. *How to Suppress Women's Writing*. Austin, University of Texas Press,
        1983.

Sahgal Nayantara, Point of View, New Delhi: Prestige, 1997

Sen, Nabaneeta Dev. "Rewriting the Ramayana: Chandrabati and Molla." *Crossing*
        *Boundaries IIC (Monsoon)*, vol. 24, no. 2/3, 1997, pp. 163–177.

Sen, Nabaneeta Dev. "When Women Retell the Ramayana." *Manushi 108*, 10 Dec. 2016.

Sengupta, Polie. *Women Centre Stage: The Dramatist and the Play*. Routledge, 2016.

Shreekala, K S. "A New Sita." *Manushi 108 4/1*, 1983.

Spender, Dale. *Man Made Language*. London, Pandora, 1990.

T. Vijay Kumar, Volga, C. Vijayasree. T*he Liberation of Sita*. HarperCollins India, 2018.

University Press, 2004.

Valmiki, and Hari Prasad Shastri. *The Ramayana of Valmiki*. Shanti Sadan, 1952.
        Women's Press, 1987.

Young, Serenity, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion*. Vol 1.

**Chapter 3**

# De-mythifying the Ramayana: A Study of the 'Devoiced' Surpanakha

**Introduction**

Down the decades, the epic Ramayana has been interpreted as the touchstone for morality in the Hindu culture. It holds a unique position in the lives of Hindus and serves as an appropriate model for ideal behaviour and virtue. The epic is a eulogy to the quintessence character of Lord Rama and his heroic deeds. He is called the *uttampurush* (ideal man) as he is the epitome of ethical conduct and an embodiment of dharma. The word Dharma is of utmost significance in the Indian religion and philosophy with perhaps no exact synonym in western languages. The etymological origins of the word may be traced back to "dhri" which roughly translates to "to support, bear or hold". The word is loosely used as a "the correct or right way of living". It can be believed to be the law that incites change without changing itself. It basically lays out the contexts in which human actions could be used to maintain the balance of the universe and preventing it from going into chaos and entropy. It is an all-encompassing philosophy that ties into the character, rights, duty, religion, customs, and vocations of all humans and categorises them as morally appropriate or not. Therefore, as a consequence Rama's image is worshipped, and his actions are admired. The epic, though considered as a benchmark of morality and ethics for the commoners, has instances and episodes, which contradict the image of Rama as the righteous one. Kathleen M. Erndl (1997) writes that many interpreters, commentators, and authors of the Ramayana have found faults in the behaviour of Rama and have questioned few of his actions that are considered convincingly ethical. Few examples are - the episode of Rama's killing of the monkey king Vali unethically from behind his back, the banishment of Sita on the grounds of public censure, or the mutilation of Ravana's sister Surpanakha by Lakshmana at the command of Rama, after her confessions of love, and sexual overtures towards Rama. This article is an attempt to articulate the voice of Surpanakha who has been traditionally, though unfairly, portrayed as a monster, an adulteress, and wicked and flawed. Even though the Surpanakha episode from the *Ramayana* is considered integral to the main story, she is considered a marginal character in the whole epic questioned few of his actions that are considered convincingly ethical. Few examples are - the episode of Rama's killing of the monkey king Vali unethically

from behind his back, the banishment of Sita on the grounds of public censure, or the mutilation of Ravana's sister Surpanakha by Lakshmana at the command of Rama, after her confessions of love, and sexual overtures towards Rama. This article is an attempt to articulate the voice of Surpanakha who has been traditionally, though unfairly, portrayed as a monster, an adulteress, and wicked and flawed. Even though the Surpanakha episode from the Ramayana is considered integral to the main story, she is considered a marginal character in the whole epic. Her characterisation is done in sharp contrast to Sita's character, who is generally considered to be the epitome of feminine qualities and virtues. Surpanakha dared to express her sexuality transgressing the societal markers of conceived femininity. The character of Surpanakha has been condemned on the grounds of body, colour, choice, and gender. On one hand Rama is shown as a chivalrous protector of women, yet on the other when he is seen commanding Lakshmana to mutilate Surpanakha for transgressing the gender boundaries, there are hardly any dissenting voice. On the contrary, there are efforts made to convince the act of mutilation as a punishment for a woman's dominion and sexuality when left unchecked by male control. There are also retellings that justify this mutilation on ethical grounds - a woman like Surpanakha who is shameless, brutal, impure and immodest, deserves such a punishment. The tale of the Ramayana upholds several ambiguous dichotomies between the good and the evil, the pure and the impure, and the male and the female. But with the publication of recent post-modern retellings these dichotomies have become blurred. The developments in the field of women studies have ideally questioned the ideologies and rules made by a patriarchal society. Most of the sacred texts are androcentric[7] and offer inherent authoritative ideologies, with patriarchal discriminations devoicing the women characters and giving them minimal space to express their choices. The traditional gendered structures of Hindu society as represented in the epic are still valued and considered as the transcendental model for the youth in the contemporary times, but with post-globalisation retellings these models are being rationalised and subjected to women-centric consciousness.

Kavita Kané's *Lankas's Princess* (2017) is one such account of the unsung Surpanakha, Ravana's sister - a strong independent woman who is able to take decisions and make

---

[7]The Ramayana and its retellings were majorly written by men like; Valmiki's *Ramayana* (4th-5th C. BC.), Kamban's *Iramvataram* (12th C.), Tulsidas's *Ramcaritmanas* (16th C.), they were also androcentric in nature.

choices but is questioned and controlled by the diktats of a patriarchal society. This novel narrates the plight of Surpanakha, from a young girl ridiculed and neglected for her looks, to her strong and independent choices in adult life refuting the stranglehold that her brothers had on her life, for which she is ultimately punished by a highly judgemental society that never forgives such transgressions. The novel is a gynocentric retelling of the Ramayana with Surpanakha as the protagonist narrating her neglected story.

## Surpanakha- The 'New-Woman'

Though Kavita Kané's Lanka's Princess is set in the Treta Yuga[8], the character of Surpanakha has more similarities with an accomplished and liberated 21st century woman than any of her contemporaries. Here, Surpankha is not a submissive or a feeble character but a strong independent woman who never fails to express her choices, needs and emotions. Growing up surrounded by men, she was always neglected and supressed, but within the existence of this patriarchal dominance she rose to fight for her rights. She subverted the conventional societal construct of determining a woman biologically, which is the ideal feminine role of bearing children.

Surpanakha represented the attributes of the 'new woman,' as she promptly voiced her inner self and asserted her identity within the patriarchal structures. Kavita Kané's Surpanakha was entrapped within the confinement of control by her brothers. The incessant disparity of gender that she faced in her family drove her to a frenzied level for vengeance and to defy all these discriminations she self-imposed an exile.

According to Kané, young Surpankha's personality was completely influenced by her complex relationship with her brothers and mother, and the open partiality shown by her mother towards her brothers. She was ridiculed by her siblings, and even by her mother for her ugly looks and dark complexion in comparison to their good looks and fair complexion. Nothing can be more humiliating and miserable for a young girl when her own mother taunts her for her looks and complexion. Additionally, she was the least

---

[8] In Hindu philosophy there are four ages of mankind and Treta Yuga is the second out of the four. It follows the Satya Yuga and is followed by the Dvapara Yuga and Kali Yuga. Treta means third and the name is indebted to the three incarnations of Vishnu were seen in this Yuga, the sixth and seventh incarnations of Parashuram and Rama respectively.

favoured child, and always denied and ignored. Her decisions were considered inconsequential by her family members, but the strong-willed and assertive Surpanakha liberated herself from the shackles of the male-dominated society by claiming her rights and choices. She was physically strong which strengthened her individual capacity to self-defence. Additionally, her keen intelligence and will-power enabled her to take decisions of her life, primarily of her own marriage, much to the dejection of her family members. She never hesitated to express her bodily desires, continually resisted the judgements made on her persona, and always sought to assert her identity and individuality.

**Meenakshi: The Girl who Became Surpanakha**

Surpanakha was born to sage Vishravas and Asura princess Kaikesi, the youngest among four siblings, with brothers Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Vibhisan being elder to her.  Her birth was a disappointment for Kaikesi as she needed more number of sons to fulfil her unaccomplished dream of regaining the lost kingdom of Lanka, which was once ruled by her father. Her father was forced to give up his throne to Lord Vishnu, and Vishnu placed Kuber, son of Rishi Vishvaras and great grandson of the creator of the universe, Brahma himself, as the new King.  Kaikesi had cleverly plotted to marry the gullible Rishi Vishvaras, who madly fell for her and was completely ignorant of her true intents. Kaikeshi's father Sumali, and mother Taraka conspired the meeting and mating of their daughter and Rishi Vishvaras. Rishi was already married to Ilavida and was father to Kuber, and much to the consternation of everyone, left his family and married Kaikeshi. Kaikeshi had three sons and she needed more sons to rule the three worlds and the golden city of Lanka. Kaikeshi recollects, "That is why I married Vishvaras, so that I could beget the best progeny, the most powerful and most wise to win back what we have lost" (2). However, the birth of a girl drowned her in disappointment. Looking at her daughter, she could not control the sense of bitterness clouding her mind, she thought, "This girl-child has cheated me of my plans" (2). Her disappointment was so intense that she could not stop herself from scornfully commenting on her looks, "She hardly looks beautiful or like me. In fact, she is quite ugly!" (2) The stage was set. Another girl, another individual, discriminated against, and pushed out on the journey of her life with a concocted handicap based on her looks and complexion. A new-born baby being so commented upon by her

own mother can only expect humiliation and rejection in her life. She either accepts her humiliation or fights the world tooth-and-nail. In Surpankaha's case, it was almost literal. She was born dark, and bonny with abnormally long nails, almost like claws, curved and sharp, but her eyes were huge and honeyed like two golden drops shining against her dark skin. Vishvaras had named her Meenakshi, one whose eyes were as golden and as graceful as a fish. However, as she grew up, she preferred to be identified by her moniker Surpankha, the one with razor-sharp nails.

Growing up among three elder brothers and being a girl-child, Surpanakha was always neglected. Ravana was her mother's favourite, and Vibhishan, was her father's favoured child. The only person who comforted her was Kumbhakarna, her middle brother. Ravana and Vibhishan were always submerged in their world of self-absorption. Ravana trained himself to become a great warrior and to claim back the throne of Lanka, which once belonged to his grandfather Sumali, the erstwhile king of Lanka. In the quest to fulfil his mother's lost dream, he mastered the art of weaponry, and learnt the four Vedas and the six shastras. Ravana was also an expert in music and his passion for politics was natural, which according to Sumali was an Asura blood trait. Both Sumali and Kaikeshi adored Ravana and believed him to be the rightful Asura heir to claim the throne of Lanka. Vibhishan was his father's pride, as he was exceptionally good with the Vedas and the shastras. He was more like his father, a rishi, engrossed in acquiring knowledge and wisdom. Kaikesi and Vishvaras argued over each other's respective favourites, Ravan and Vibhishan, and in the process completely neglected to give any attention to the happiness of their youngest child, Surpanakha. One of the instances was when Surpanakha found her pet lamb Maya lying dead in a pool of blood, her neck twisted, and her pink tongue sticking out. She was grief-stricken at the sight and was shocked to know that Ravana had killed her pet. Ravana in fit of rage had killed Maya because she had chomped away all the medicinal plants that he had planted. Surpanakha was stupefied with distress, and teary-eyed accused her elder brother, who showed no moral culpability for the violence he had executed. As Ravana growled at her, "You should have trained your pet, Meenu…she ruined months of efforts and patience that dumb animal" (7), Surpanakha felt her grief slowly coiling into a fury of rage and resentment towards her brother. She sprang on Ravan unsuspectedly and dug her nails into the tender flesh of his neck, her clawing fingers tearing the skin and exposing the flesh. Ravana, bleeding profusely cried out in pain and fury, 'you ugly wretch…Surpanakha, that is what she is…a witch with long,

sharp claws'. (8) Even her mother rebuked her for her audacity to attack her elder brother. She also condemned her for not behaving like a girl but indulging in fights, 'Surpankha that is the right name for you, you monster'. Hearing her mother blatantly supporting Ravana, and uttering those words, she was completely disillusioned, and she screeched out of anger and pain, "Yes I am a monster." She proclaimed with professed pleasure that if those nails could protect her then she had no problem in being called Surpanakha, the one with sharp nails.

Surpanakha seen from the eyes of her beautiful mother was nothing but an ugly looking child. She was frequently commented upon as a monster and an ugly-looking wretch. Her self-confidence was repeatedly crushed, and she felt like an outsider in her family of good lookers, perennially waiting for some miracle to happen to hide her ostensible deformity. It was only Taraka, her maternal grandmother who boosted her confidence with soothing words about her unique beauty, "…love that smooth dusky skin, love that petite, fragile figure of yours, those big honey drop eyes…' (22). Her able defence against outside forces was criticised by her mother; on one occasion when she fought aggressively in support of her meek brother Vibhishan, she was reprimanded by her mother that Vibishan was a boy and could take care of himself. Similarly, after her violent retaliation against Ravana for killing her beloved lamb Maya, her mother admonished her by saying that she dared not attack her elder brother. The name Surpanakha was hurled at her by a furious Ravan because of her claw-like nails, and this name became her forced identity that she had to live with for the rest of her life. Today the readers hardly know that her original name was Meenakshi. For readers across generations she is only Surpanakha, the reviled one.


**Surpankha's Fight for Love**


Surpanakha's life in Lanka was under constant surveillance because of her over-protective brothers. She was not allowed to go beyond the premises of the palace, and she felt trapped inside the magnificent palace. The glamour and opulence of the palace never allured her; on the contrary, it seemed to confine her, and her decisions, choices, and needs. Surpanakha gradually grew up to a full woman and had become very sensuous looking with her heavy breasts, petite waist, and round buttocks. Her dusky colour,

voluptuous figure and the pair of beautiful and golden eyes were admired by men in Lanka, but nobody dared to approach her, as the suitors were petrified to face the wrath of her brother Ravana. She was an unwanted child since her birth and had to suffer discrimination at every step. This disparity created a division between her and her family and due to which she tried to find love in the simple things of life, like her pet lamb Maya, which was very dear to her but was mercilessly killed by her own brother. Her grandmother Taraka was also very close to her. Taraka adored her, boosted her morally and was the only person to take her side and defend her, but she was also killed in a conflict. She craved for love, affection, and adoration, but her wishes were ignored all the time. Even after attaining the marriageable age, Surpanakha's desire for a marital life was largely ignored by her brothers, and instead they themselves got married. She was envious of Mandodari (Ravana's wife), whose brothers looked after their sister's well-being before their own, unlike her brothers who got married themselves without ever considering about their sister. She longed and wished for such brothers who would put her needs before theirs. All her brothers got married into powerful families to build alliances with powerful kingdoms. Surpanakha was very cynical of this, as she believed that these marriages were purely out of self-interest and these arrangements of love were in guise of expanding the kingdom of Lanka. Ravana wanted all the family-ties to be done with influential families. But Surpanakha was in search for true love and companionship, with no hidden interests.

In one of brother's marriage ceremony, she met Vidyujiva and she found the love that she was craving for years. She was charmed by his courage to approach her directly and confess his love for her. She was amused by his words of love, which she never thought she could find, 'I love you because there is no reason. I just hopelessly, irrationally did!'(115). Vidyujiva on the other hand was a rival of Ravana, a Kalkeya king and Kalkeyas always had an eye for the throne of Lanka, and after Ravana came to know about the love-affair he secretly planned to kill Vidyujiva. All the members of the family were sceptical of her choice and were against her decision of marrying Vidyujiva. Vidyjiva because of his Kalkeya lineage was doubted upon, and his proclaimed feelings for Surpanakha were considered as a veil to cover his malicious scheme of snatching the kingdom of Lanka from Ravana. But here again Surpanakha was determined to fight for her right to choose a life-partner. She went against the will of her family and managed to convince Ravana on the grounds of disclosing his unethical actions to his wife Mandodari. Ravana agreed to Surpanakha's marriage under the condition that Vidyujiva had to stay in

Lanka after the marriage and serve in his court. Vidyujiva gave in to the deal and married Supanakha, but the deal could not suffice the anxiety Surpanakha sensed for her husband's well-being. Though she is portrayed as a vamp in the original epic, Kavita Kané's Surpanakha had a human side, she was a passionate and dutiful wife, and was affectionate towards her sisters-in law. She was fond of her nephews and was a loving mother to her son. But what triggered the ugly side of Surpanakha was the treacherous death of her husband in the hands of Ravana, proclaiming Vidyujiva as a traitor. Her whole family were unapologetic about the murder and persuaded her to believe that she was too gullible to fall for Vidyujiva. This evoked misery and vengeance in her and she plotted to destroy her family who murdered her husband around whom her life revolved. She schemed to use Rama and Lakshmana as pawns to finish off her brother Ravana. Her anger was directed at a family, which destroyed her identity, questioned her choices, ignored her values, and killed the love of her life in the guise of the safety of Lanka. The grief of being widowed by her own brothers was all-consuming and she imposed an exile on her own self in the Dandaka forest, far away from Lanka.

**Expressing a Desire for Male Intimacy**

The wilderness of Dandaka forest gave Surpanakha a sense of freedom and she loved the ravaged wilderness. Unlike Lanka where there was hostility inside the resplendent palace, in Dandaka existed a natural discipline where plants, animals, humans and demons feared but respected each other. The forest was not one's possession but for everyone. The forest became her home and she preferred the moniker Surpanakha over Meenakshi. The miseries of life had taken away the compassion and love she had within herself. The death of her husband had made her heedless to any emotion and she only yearned for vengeance. She had become a savagely violent woman, reborn as Surpanakha.

She moved out of Lanka with her son Kumar, pledging to take revenge of her husband's murder, and contemplating that it would be Kumar who would take the revenge. Though spending years in Dandaka the scars of the death of Vidyujiva were still fresh within her, and her son Kumar vowed to avenge his father's murder. He trained himself to fight against Ravana, mastered all the celestial and occult weaponry, but he also yearned for the blessings of lord Shiva, just as Ravana had been previously blessed. He set out on his

journey for self-mortification but was mysteriously killed while performing it. Surpanakha was left all alone in her fight for revenge. She lost both her husband and her son, and an unusual loneliness engulfed her in Dandaka forest. She was distraught with misery and panic as she realised that because of her demented lust for revenge, she had lost her son. But she also blamed it on her fate and her family who made her walk through this excruciating trail.

One day while wandering alone in the forest, Surpanakha's eyes caught a glimpse of Rama and Lakshmana. She was mesmerized at the pleasurable sight, the striking-looking brothers tightening the strings of their bows, their strong muscles rippling under their tanned skins and she felt a surge of hot blood rush in. "She wanted them, badly, madly. She wondered what it would be like to have them and her body grew hot, moist and yielding at the thought. They must be skilled and intense lovers, but she would control them" (193). She wanted to seduce them and believed that they would be easy prey like most men, susceptible to her sexual allure.  No doubt, she felt an emotion of shame for lusting after two young men at her age, but she also wanted to find solace in lust, and feverishly wanted men to fill in the lonely hours. She recalled her grandmother's words, "…there was no shame in desiring a man" (194). She wanted sexual intimacy with either of the two men to dissipate the loneliness she felt after Vidyujiva's death. She rushed forward to expose her ravaging lust for them and approached Rama but was declined as he was accompanied by Sita, and he directed her towards Lakshmana as he was available and was free to accept her. But Lakshmana also rejected her citing the fact that even though he was travelling alone, he was married to Urmila, who was waiting for him in Ayodhya. Lakshmana again directed her back towards Rama suggesting that he was just a mere servant to his brother Rama, and she deserved better, so she must convince Rama. Surpanakha realised that both the brothers were mocking her, "… were laughing at her, reeling her to and fro like a toy, like a mere means of amusement" (200).  She stood in the middle and watched the two brothers, handsome and cruel, grinning, and poking fun at her. In the rage of rejection and humiliation, she tried to attack Sita but was stopped by Lakshmana. Ram ordered Lakshmana to teach the 'unvirtuous' Surpanakha a lesson she will never forget. He instructed Lakshman to mutilate her, 'maim her' (202), a punishment which will be a reminder for her dishonourable crime. Surpanakha could not believe her ears - 'maim her!' She was appalled by the declaration of such barbarity; she was unable to understand whether the punishment was for transgressing the perceived moral

82

boundaries and assaulting their chastity, or for trying to attack Sita. She wondered how someone so beautiful could be so cruel to someone just for exhibiting bodily needs. Lakshmana's sword slashed off her nose and ears, she felt a sharp pain and the gush of warm blood on her skin. The throbbing pain made her confused; she touched her face, which felt odd. She was stricken with frenzied horror when she realised that Lakshmana had mutilated her nose and ears. She ran fanatically in a fire of agony trying to cover her bloodied face of pain and shame. Surpanakha fled to her brother Ravana and convinced him to avenge for the heinous crime that the princes had committed. She narrated the dreadful scene to him, but at the same time did not forget to describe the extraordinary beauty of Sita. She was shrewd enough to realise that even if her plight did not move Ravana to avenge her, Sita's extraordinary beauty would certainly force him to take some action. Her words aroused a passionate desire in Ravana and to avenge her sister's dishonour he abducted Sita and carried her to Lanka. Humiliated by Rama and Lakshmana, Surpanakha becomes the cause of the war of *Ramayana* between Rama and Ravana.

**Conclusion**

Surpankaha is one of the most ignored and misunderstood characters of the *Ramayana*. Even though the space offered to Surpnakha in Valmiki's Ramayana was inconsequential, yet her character was certainly important because she was the precursor to the war of Lanka. Kavita Kané's Lanka's Princess successfully recounts the unheard voice of Surpanakha and portrays an image that resonates into one's psyche. It questions the authoritarian ideologies the epic had burdened her with where she was presented as an immodest, unvirtuous, and obnoxious woman. This alternative retelling of Ramayana narrates the story of Surpanakha, where she is portrayed as a strong and independent woman who is able to fight for her own rights and take her own independent decisions. She was a victim in the hands of patriarchal dominance and a gender-biased society. But she liberated herself from the clutches of the traditional gendered structures of the Hindu society through her strong will-power and individualistic determination. She made choices of her own and succeeded in attaining those choices. She had to travel through an excruciating trail, facing discrimination because of her gender, looks and her astuteness.

Her choices were never taken seriously, and she was enforced upon by her brothers to believe that she was too gullible to make any appropriate choice. The traditional gender roles have always portrayed women as dependent beings who need guidance and protection, initially by her father or brother and later by her husband and son. According the Manusmriti, *The Law Code of Manu* (2004) the ancient Hindu text that is traditionally considered as an influential guide in determining the structure and function of the Hindu society, the status of women is limited to the household and for bearing children. It instructs women that their role in the society is to be a good wife by obeying and serving their husbands. But Surpanakha rejects these gender roles, transgresses the markers of femininity, and asserts herself within the patriarchal boundary. She avenges the insults meted out to her, fights for her rights, makes her own choices, and protects herself from the gendering done by her family. To that extent a remarkable parallel can be drawn between her, a character from an ancient Hindu epic, and the 'new woman,' or the 21st century empowered woman who knows how to claim her own rights, make her own choices, is not averse to explicitly express her sexual desires for the man of her choice, and is not bound by the traditional moralities of the society.

The episode of mutilation of Surpanakha sheds light on the Hindu attitude towards female sexuality in relationship to polarities like pure and impure, 'good woman' and 'bad woman'. Sita and Surpanakha exemplify two types of women: Sita is good, pure, chaste, and subordinate, whereas Surpanakha is evil, impure, unvirtuous and insubordinate. The good woman is the one who is controlled, both mentally and physically by her husband and whose sexuality is limited to childbearing and service to her husband. Sita is subordinate to her husband; she comes to the forest as a companion to her husband. She is protected and controlled in every step. On the other hand, Surpanakha the bad woman, does not succumb to these controls, she is unattached and free. She conveys her sexual desires without any shame or inhibitions. She does not hide her desires and hence is considered unvirtuous, since it is expected of women to have satiable sexual appetites. Surpanakha's status as an independent woman is denounced and is perceived as dangerous because she assaulted the moralities of Rama and Lakshmana. But the question that is to be raised here is, does she assault the moralities of the two men, or is it their own inherent sexual weaknesses that push them to punish her rather than get exposed in front of everybody.

The novel opens and ends with a scene of the Krishna reincarnation of Rama, accepting and comforting Kubja, the reincarnation of Surpanakha whom he had turned down in his previous birth. All the miseries that Surpankaha had suffered in her previous life, the disfigurement suffered at the hands of Lakshmana on the instruction of Rama, and the penance of her present life where she was born with a hunchback, and facing discrimination and mockery, are all erased with Krishna's touch. Krishna transforms her twisted body into a new one, beautiful and serene. When Kubja asked him for his identity, Krishna replies:

"I am the one who turned you down once. I am the same man. Ram then, now Krishna…I have come for you Kubja, for the grave misdeed I committed in my last life, where you were Surpanakha in your previous birth. And I was Ram." (xiii)

Kavita Kané's Surpanakha represents the 'new woman' of the 21st the century who does not succumb to control and dominance. She is an independent woman who rightfully expresses her choices, voices her desires, and asserts her identity within the patriarchal controls. Though considered a demoness, she had a human side that was neglected. She was a strong liberated woman, a passionate lover, a dutiful wife, and an affectionate mother. Through Lanka's Princess, the character of Surpanakha is empowered, and given a voice to speak and react.

**Works Cited**

Cixous, Helene. *Feminisms – An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robin
    R.Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers
    University Press, 1991.

Cohen, Jeffrey. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota,
    1996.

Creed, BarbarA. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis.* London and

Erndl, M. K., "The Mutilation of Surpanakha". In*: Many Rāmāyanas: the Diversity of a
    Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. Eds. by P. Richman. New Delhi: Oxford
    University Press, 1997.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Gubar, Susan. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer
    and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven and London: Yale
    University Press, 1984.

Harlan, L., Courtright, and P. B., *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on
    Gender, Religion and Culture.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Kané, K. *Lanka's Princess*. New Delhi: Rupa, 2017

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New
    London: Routledge, 2006.

Menon, N., *Seeing like a Feminist*. New Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2012

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Ann Russo, Lourdes Torres (Eds.). *Third World Women and
    the Politics of Feminism*. Indiana UP, 1991.

    New York: Routledge, 1993.

Olivelle, Patrick *The Law Code of Manu*. New York: OUP. 2004.

Padia, Chandrakala. "Introduction." *Feminism, Tradition and Modernity*. IIAS, 2002, pp
1-24.

Parker, Lyn."Conclusion." *The Agency of Women in Asia*. Marshall Cavendish, 2005.

Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Sita -An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*. Gurgaon: Penguin
    Books, 2013.

Pykett, L.The "Improper" Feminine: the Women's Sensation Novel and the New   Woman
    Writing. London: Routledge, 1992.

Richman Paula, *Ramayana Stories: In Modern South India, An Anthology*. Indiana: UP,
2008.

Sharma, K. S. "Redefining Self: Women in Postcolonial Indian English Literature: An Indian Approach". Ed. M. Agarwal. *Women in Postcolonial Indian English Literature: Redefining Self*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2011.

Sunder Rajan, R., *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, Postcolonialism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

Thapan, M. *Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Ussher, Jane. *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body*. York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

**Chapter 4**

# Hearing the Unheard: Urmila's Quest for an Identity

## Introduction

Among the plethora of characters in the immortal epic *Ramayana*, the character of Urmila, Laxman's wife has endured the underserved indifferences. She is arguably the most side-lined character who the author sage Valmiki has given minimal space within the epic. The name Urmila hardly appears twice or thrice in the epic and even Kamban's Iramvataram (12th C), Tulsidas's Ramcharitramanas (16th C), Krttibas's Bengali Ramayana (15th C)and R. K Narayan's English Ramayana (1972)or other versions of Ramayana hardly mentions her story in their retellings. The character of Urmila has been ignored to such a magnitude that her plight has been dismissed and her identity has been reduced to being just the wife of Laxman, who slept his part of sleep for fourteen years. Consequently, Urmila was muted and consigned to oblivion. When Ram was exiled by his stepmother Kaikeyi to spent fourteen years of his life as a hermit in the forest, he was accompanied by his wife Sita and brother Laxman. Laxman's decision to serve his brother for fourteen year came as a shock to Urmila, as the decision was taken without her consent. Urmila wanted to join them as Sita did but as a duty-bound wife she stayed considering this act as a higher purpose for her husband who was born to serve his brother Ram. Furthermore, her presence may have distracted Laxman from his noble aspirations and thus she stayed undergoing the pain of separation from her husband for fourteen years. Urmila selflessly gave away her domestic bliss and becomes the icon of acquiescence.

The adversity Urmila received throughout the epic was notified by Rabindranath Tagore in his essay *Kabye Upeksita* (The Neglected in Literature), considered her as the forgotten heroine of the Indian literature to whom no creative justice was given. Following this begun an academic innovation that resorted to writing poetry on Urmila and her predicaments in the epic. In the regional retellings, likely in Hindi literature few poets ushered on narrating poems on the unexplored potential characters. Mahaveer Prasad Dwiwedi in *Sarswathi*, Balkrishna Sharma "Naveen" in *Urmila* and Maithilisharan Gupt in his magnum opus *Saket* (1931) or the *Ramayana* ballad named "Urmiladevi Nidra" (Urmila's Sleep) in Telegu, mostly sung by women, have placed Urmila as the central character of their artistic creation. Formerly, the epic literally devoiced Urmila by making

her sleep for altogether fourteen years, but later with the new poetic movements, these works revived the tradition of writing epics which subverted the traditional ideals and presented a contrasting picture like that of Urmila, where her sleep symbolised the disposition of her share of story from the epic.

However, in the era of post-millennium a rereading of Urmila is important as her story needs to be told, not forgotten in the margins of the myths.in the Indian English Fiction, best-selling author Kavita Kané's Sitas's Sister (2014) has solely dedicated to the character of Urmila. This fiction narrates the life of Urmila and simultaneously retells the epic *Ramayana* from her perspective. Here Urmila is not any other character but the protagonist of the novel who is also an epitome of femininity like Sita. This novel revolves around the life of Urmila who was accompanied by Sita and her cousins Mandavi and Shrutakriti. These sisters were together since birth and were even married in the same family. This retelling of *P* delves into the inner stories of those characters which facilitated the epic but were overshadowed by other prime characters like Ram, Sita, Lakshman and Bharat who are the embodiments of certain ideals. Urmila is one of the neglected characters who deserve a voice to articulate and this version of retelling reclaims her from the margin and places her in the centre. This chapter will explore the course of events from Urmila's perspective and study the diktats of the patriarchal society of her times. However, Urmila negotiates her way throughout the novel with a clear purpose by resisting and fighting the patriarchal conventions.

**Urmila: An Epitome of Femininity**

Here in Sita's Sister, Urmila adorns many roles, a protective sister, an ideal daughter, a supportive wife and a responsible daughter-in-law. She is also a well-versed scholar and an artist. However irrespective of the myriad of roles she plays, what stands out is her ability to handle every situation with finesse and confidence. Her journey from Mithila to Ayodhya is an allegorical search for an individual identity. Urmila all her life has been identified as Sita's sister or Lakshman's wife, but this narrative establishes an identity of Urmila which is equally potential like the other prime characters. Kané also re-creates Urmila as a woman of immense strength, a distinct identity, sharp thinking, and a loving heart. She traversed the journey of tragedy with dignity and strength. In this version of

rendering, Urmila's sacrifice is not a passive one, but she actively takes charge of her life and moves forward. Kavita Kané in one of the interviews express the active role of her protagonist Urmila— "She slept for fourteen years when her husband was away on exile... It was metaphorical... Instead I looked her beyond being Sita"s sister or Lakshman's wife or Janak's daughter. A scholar, an artist, and a woman who held the fort at Ayodhya when the three went on their exile" (Sruti's Book Blog).

Urmila was the biological daughter of King Janak and Queen Sunaina of Mithila and the younger sister to Sita. Sita was the adopted daughter of the King Janak, who found her while ploughing the fields as a part of ritual they were performing. Though Urmila was younger to Sita, but her perceptions, understanding and reasons were mature beyond her age. Urmila was more like the older sister to Sita— "strong, fiercely protective like a tigress shielding her from everything, guiding her, helping her, consoling her. Her parents' love had been smothering and the sweetest memories she carried was of her younger sister" (24).

Since Sita was the adopted daughter, she was showered with favours, utmost adoration, and love. Whereas Urmila had to tolerate all the anger and scolding but neveran iota of envy affected her. Furthermore, Sita was always referred as Janaki, Janak's daughter and Maithili, princess of Mithila but it was Urmila who was the proprietor of these titles. These special treatments towards Sita never made her resentful in any circumstance. Besides, Urmila was dear to Sita who never made her realise of her foundling status and protected her from every misery. For Sita, "she (Urmila) was her anchor who secured her to a comforting veracity of her own existence. Urmila was her lifeline; she was her soulmate" (22). Although, Sita was excessively adored by her parents but it was Urmila—

> who treated her 'normally'—like a sister would another. Urmila had screamed at her, pulled her hair, pinched her, argued bitterly and each time, it had been Urmila who had earned the ire of her parents. Praise was reserved for Sita (23).

The life of the four sisters in Mithila was distinctively unique; all the four sisters under the tutelage King Janak who himself was a rajarishi, well versed in Vedas and shatras were well educated, proficient in Vedas, Upanishads, politics, music, art and literature. King Janak gave them all sorts of liberty from giving proper education to voicing their own choices. Mithila gave them freedom by allowing them to think independently. King Janak

treated his daughters no less than any male child; he gave them opportunities to explore their interests. He was way forwards than his contemporaries and often the four princesses, "have accompanied their father to all the conferences and religious seminars across the country, experiencing a world no princess had been allowed to visit" (9). Besides acquiring proper education and broadening their intellectual quotient, the sisters were always together supporting each other in every circumstance and Urmila played a pivot role in holding all the sisters together.

Kavita Kané created Urmila as a strong and independent woman with a mind of her own. Her inclination towards intellectual pursuits and quest for knowledge was immense which could be understood— "Marriage did not hold much interest for Urmila but it was a social discipline she would have to conform to. She would rather seek knowledge instead of a suitor" (9). Traditionally all intellectual engagements were privileged only to men but in this novel, women break the gender stereotype and pursue knowledge. Though all the sisters grew up in the same liberal environment, yet Urmila was one step ahead from them. She nurtured inside her the intellectual spark. She was a feminist thousand years ago, a scholar who "yearned for more; she wanted to see more places, places she had heard about through her growing years…" (9) She was not a weak fickle lady, who could not stand up for her own cause. After all she was "King Janak's daughter … and no ordinary princess" (69). Guru Kashyap acknowledges her as the brilliant questioning mind. Mandavi calls her "the free thinker who doesn't believe in rights and rituals" (17). Therefore, in a whole she represented a woman who yearned to seek knowledge that added a purpose to her life.

**The marriage and separation**

Urmila fought every insecurity and fear within and around her to marry Lakshman. This step contemporized her, in the sense that she stood strong with her decision of marrying Lakshman even though her mother Sunaina was sceptical about her choice. Sunaina somehow had the suspicion that getting all her daughter married in the same household may be a wrong decision. This proposal may disturb the equation among the sisters or their husbands, respectively. However, Urmila asserts that this marriage would strengthen the relationship among the girls and their love is strong enough to let anyone come in

between them. On contrary, Sunaina crossed her viewpoint by asking, "And you husbands? If such a situation arises, and it will happen someday, sometime— before any one of you, where you are cornered into choosing between your husband and your sister, whom would you choose, dear?" (56). Nonetheless, she assured her mother of her choice and convinced her that her love for her sisters and her husband shall never clash. She further added,

> "Both would know that I love them unconditionally and both would think twice before causing such hurt. They would, rather, try to avoid such a crisis— something I can be assured of from my sister but not from a stranger sister-in-law. Oh Ma, having a sister for a sister-in-law is a boon! Don't every worry about us. We shall look after each other beautifully, I assure you, I promise you" (56).

But the final battle for love was with none other than Lakshman himself who refused to marry her for the fear of losing her because of his devotion towards Ram. His conflict and anguish are expressed in the clear decision that Ram will be his first choice. He says, "I had no intention of marrying ever. For me, my life is being with my brother. He is my all. He is my friend, my teacher, my life, my soul. I cannot do without him— that's how I have grown up, that's how I have been made" (66). He also declared that whenever any situation arises where he has to choose between Urmila and his brother, his first will be his brother Ram. However, Lakshman fell for Urmila the moment he saw her and was petrified by the thought that his love for Urmila may distract him in his service towards Ram. He was afraid because he cannot forsake her happiness for his principles. Therefore, Lakshman apprises Urmila about his quandary before the marriage. He further added,

> "You are too beautiful, too good to make me hope you would be accessible or accept my love. I have been in love with you from the beautiful moment when I saw you looking at me haughtily in the garden with that pooja thali in your hands. And nothing has been the same ever again. Not me, my peace of mind, my pride, my everything… but what can I give you? Nothing but sorrow and heartache. I cannot promise you happiness. And that's why I cannot marry you". (65)

On the contrary, Urmila was able to put his anxieties to rest and expressed her decision to marry Lakshman. She convinced Lakshman by assuring that her love was not demanding complete surrender by forgoing one's duties and responsibilities. For her, love was selfless

which never believed in caging the loved once. She assured that she will never come in between Lakshaman and his duties towards Ram. Urmila said,

> Loving is also giving; you are not ready to give yourself to me.  But you don't see, I don't want our complete surrender. I love your but that does not mean I possess you, our beliefs and your loyalties. I assure you that I shall never come between your loyalties. I assure you that I shall never come between your loyalty to your brothers and your family. Likewise, shall not allow my love for you to be threatened by my love for my sisters and my parents. By loving you, my love for them will never falter, nor should yours (67).

Urmila was unafraid to face uncomfortable truths and consequences of her conscious and active choices. Here too as modern woman Urmila made the choice after knowing all the parameters. She clearly understands and accepts her role as a second in both her paternal and marital homes. But their marital bliss did not persist long as Lakshman decided to accompany Ram in his exile for fourteen years. She knew the unflinching loyalty Lakshman had for his brother and she accepted the separation with dignity. Urmila also understood that her company in the forest may be a hindrance for Lakshman in his service towards Ram and Sita and so she sacrificed her happiness and accepted the separation. She accepted the exile with such a grace that she requested Sita not to discuss about her with Lakshman during the period of exile. Moreover, Urmila did not want to be any kind of impediment in Lakshman's obligation to protect his brother. Therefore, she proved her unconditional love for Lakshman and bid farewell to him without shedding a drop of tear. On the other hand, Lakshman acknowledged the sacrifice Urmila made in order to help him perform his duties as a loyal brother without any hindrance. He was also guilty about the fact that he had to choose Ram over Urmila, leaving her behind to look after his parents. Finally, before leaving Lakshman said,

> O Urmila, will the world ever know of your inner suffering, your divine sacrifice? But my heart, full of shame and gratitude, knows what you are doing in silence, through your brave smile, your generous heart. Eternally, your Lakshman will be grateful to you and be proud of you. I go now and leave you alone, but I leave my soul, my heart here with you… As a husband, I should have taken care of her, looked after her, been here for her and protected her. I am doing none of that but

leaving her behind to look after my old parents. I have failed as a husband and as a son. (158)

Although, the pain of separation was annihilating but she rose beyond the despondent circumstance. Her intellectual quest and control over self-pity helped her to handle the situation positively. Urmila from time to time recalled in her mind that, "there was no place for maudlin self-pity or wasted sentimentality" (157). She consoled herself and pledged herself that the separation would not affect her to an extent that she would give up her rights, but she will create her own identity in the absence of her husband.

**The Scholar**

Urmila gained mastery over Vedas and Shastras under the tutelage of sage Vasistha and other gurus of the royal court of Ayodhya— Guru Vaamdeva, Markandeya, Katyayan and Kashyap. Her intellectual abilities were acknowledged by all the sages and her perseverant study had acclaimed her as a learned scholar. Urmila could proficiently debate on religion and philosophy with learned sages and appreciating this face, king Janak invites her to participate in an annual symposium not as a daughter but as an acclaimed scholar. At the conference Urmila sat amongst the brilliant minds of the country,

> "with the famous lady philosopher Guru Gargi, the deformed Rishi Ashtavarka, Guru Vashishta and Guru Markendeya from the royal court of Ayodhya and Rish Yagnavalkya who challenged his own teacher and who was also her father's guru. Seated aongst them, Urmila felt a sense of deep humility. It dissolved all false pride, absorbed her trivialities. As she felt the calmness descend on her, she was poignantly fired with a new sense of purpose, a goal she had to strive forwards. Each time she recited the Vedic verses or succinctly debated with Guru Jaabali, she saw her father listening intently, his brows furrowed, his face thoughtful but in his eyes was a tenderness touched with pride, and in that moment, Urmila felt she was at last her father's daughter. She was Urmila, not just the woman of passion as her name so defined her but one whose heart and mind had come together in intellectual and spiritual enrichment" (269).

King Janak's invitation to attend the conference as a scholar embraced her with a sense of accomplishment. Her hard work and perseverance were acknowledged by great seers and especially by her father. Although Urmila was surprised by this act of respect showed to her for her achievement. At last she truly felt like King Janak's daughter; for she could debate like her father over a myriad of topics on religion and philosophy. For Urmila, her father was her only guru whom she admired and followed. For King Janak, all her daughters were his pride and he never yearned for a son. He raised all of them to be exemplary human beings and provided platform for free and liberal discussion on any philosophical topic. He also encouraged his daughters to widen their intellectual insights with knowledge. Furthermore, all his daughters were learned and confident but and Urmila left her mark as a woman with a fertile mind and generous heart. Owing to this, King Janak already knew about his daughter's achievement of becoming a learned scholar before Urmila herself would have known. In one instance, king Janak expresses to his heart's content about Urmila's conviction in learning new things. He said,

> You had a curious mind, a kind heart and clarity of ideas and expressions which you knew how to use wisely, even as a child. 'It got honed well as you grew up and I am thankful that you took advantage of the royal rishis of Ayodhya under whose tutelage you so excelled.' (269)

The fabric of the social order in Ayodhya broke when Ram and Sita along with Lakshman departed for the exile of fourteen years imposed on Ram by his stepmother Kayikeyi. In consequence to the separation with Lakshman, Urmila became the unfortunate victim. She retreated herself in a shell and found refuge in the vast world of knowledge. Urmila accepted the separation boldly and as a responsible daughter-in-law, she took care of her in-laws by fulfilling her duties. Though the pangs of separation crushed her from inside, yet she embarked on a journey of creating her own identity. She chose to handle the situation differently and find a purpose to her life. As a result, her artistic and intellectual aspirations took the upper hand and she like an ardent devotee found solace in seeking knowledge. The time periods of fourteen years helped Urmila to evolve as a woman of wisdom and earned her the title of a scholar. Besides the hapless situation she endured, king Janak praised her for her achievements. He proudly acknowledged her as a strong soul who adorned pain like a warrior and moved forward to create her own identity. King Janak says,

Ram sought opportunity in exile. So did Lakshman— his brother's exile was an exile for him too. And as the wife of Lakshman, it was an exile for you as well— an exile from attachment. Because only with detachment one learns the value of love versus the range of emotions. These years have taught you that. 'The exile made you understand the meaning of *tapsya* and thus made you a *tapsvi*'. And as a great t*apsvi* who gained great spiritual understanding and intellectual attainment, I greet you today as a scholar. Your scholarship came not just from reciting verses and detailed study but primarily from your pain, your separation, your detachment. Your separation was your meditation, your spiritual rebirth and your love for you husband became your salvation' (221).

**The Guardian Angel**

Urmila represents the essence of femininity and throughout the novel, she also exhibits courage and fearlessness. Her bold choices are physically manifested in the novel when she becomes fiercely protective of people close to her— be it Sita, Lakshman, or her sisters. In several instances, Urmila dauntingly faces any formidable situation in order to protect her loved once. Like in the chapter 'The Swayamvar', for all the suitors lifting the sacred bow and stringing it, the only agreement for marrying Sita, was becoming an impossible task. Consequently, the situation was turning unruly leading to an uproar. Ravana and other suitors surrendered and rebuked the agreement calling it a hopeless attempt. As Ravana declared when he was unable to even move the bow,

I must have fallen short in my penance to Lord Shiva that I could not do what I was asked to. But I do know that if I cannot move it, none present in the room can. So, King Janak, do you wish your daughter to remain unmarried? Because no one in this room will be able to string the bow— it is impossible to even shift it. What sort of suicidal condition have you laid for your daughter? Do want her to remain spinster? I would not wish that, sir, and despite everything, am ready to marry her. (31)

Similarly other suitors too were mounted with sense of anger and frustration with impossible task given to them. They also agreed with Ravana and expressed their

disapproval to King Janak, They accused King Janak of insulting them and teasing their egos, 'O King, your stipulation for this *swayamvar* is absolutely hopeless and you well knew it was certain to fail. You are insulting our pride, our respect, our capability! If not your elder daughter, we demand that we be allowed to choose the other princesses in marriage instead!' (33). Here Urmila sensed the hostility of the situation and understood the foremost priority is to protect herself and her sisters from the antagonistic suitors— 'How was she going to save herself from this impending predicament? But seeing her father's wan face, her trepidation was replaced by swift indignation. She knew she would have to battle it alone- for herself and her sisters' (34). Later it was prince Ram, who strung the bow and won Sita's hand for marriage. But in the process of being strung, the bow broke into pieces. This act enraged rishi Parashuram. He wanted to know who broke the mystic bow gifted to him by Lord Shiva that he handed to the forefathers of Mithila. In respect to this situation, Lakshman intervened to convince Parashuram, to make him see reason. He explained that his brother Ram was the only suitor to pick up the bow when no one could even move the bow. But in the process of being strung the bow broke into two pieces since it was old. His remark instead infuriated sage Parashuram, who wanted to attack Lakshman. As the situation deteriorated rapidly, Urmila could not stop herself and intervened to save Lakshman from the sage's wrath. She went up to Parashuram with unfaltering steps, her head bowed, her eyes beseeching, and her hands folded, to seek his blessings and said,

> We are indeed blessed by your visit. Sir you must be tired…please take a seat and rest. Saying this she bent down to touch the sage's feet, hoping desperately her ploy had worked in distracting the angry man. The rishi instinctively murmured, 'Bless you princess. May your husband live in your lifetime! (38).

These events clearly pronounce her courage and loyalty to the people she loved. Although, the same Urmila did not hesitate to attack Lakshman with a dagger when he killed a demon, which was in the guise of Sita. She was fiercely protective about Sita and beyond her reason she could not perceive that it was a demon disguised as Sita. Urmila like a warrior pounced on Lakshman and the dagger hanging at his waist, snatched it, "she tried to thrust it in his neck, his shoulders, his back- anywhere she could reach and hurt him grievously to allow her to escape from his restraining grasp" (49). Urmila was warrior-like in her courage and loyalty manifesting a feminist identity which makes Lakhman claim her as his "warrior wife" (224). Similarly, when queen Kaikeyi knew

about Urmila's act of protecting Sita when Lakshman has killed the demon disguised as Sita, complimented her as a "blood-thirsty, knife brandishing warrior" (103). Both Urmila and Lakshman were similar in their roles as protectors. Both addressed each other as warriors and both of them were alike in their temperament, "Urmila's fiery contentious nature and Lakshman's stiff hauteur… both shared common affliction— the prickly egotism" (46).

Urmila has always played the role of a protective shield for her family. She was beside her sisters in every situation, be it any confrontation or challenge, pain and stress or unbound happiness. Urmila stood strong behind them motivating them and nurturing them like a mother. Likewise, she was a big support for her mother, Sunaina. When all the four girls were married in the same household Sunaina was worried about their domestic lives. Because the dynamics of the relations of her daughters had changed, they were now not only sisters but sister-in-law. She was troubled by the thought of jealousy affecting the unity among the sisters, but she trusted Urmila. Urmila had her faith because she was always able to bind the sisters together and she also believed that Urmila could handle any situation with finesse and maturity. As Sunaina says, "with you there to look after your sisters, I have no reason to fret. You might not know, Urmila, but you are their strength, their guiding force. Like you were, and are, for me. You have mothered me as often as you have you sisters. I shall miss you but each time with pride that I am the mother of such a daughter". (90)

Urmila throughout the novel asserts her identity as a woman with a purpose. She changes the narrative of a traditional daughter-in-law whose position is restricted within the inner walls of their respective homes. On contrary, she makes feminist claim to be taken seriously and considered on an equal footing with men. She takes part in the affairs of the state and takes crucial decisions in the absence of Bharat. When Ram and Lakshman were sent on an exile, Bharat was also a way to check on other matters of the court and as a result the throne of Ayodhya was lying vacant. The matters of the royal court were not settled and in this hapless situation, all the ministers and the royal sages wanted someone to look into the matters of court. The court could not think of anyone else other than Urmila to step into the courtly matters. The ministers and learned members of the court like Jabali, Markandeya, Gautam, Kashyap, and Katyayana requested Urmila— "O daughter of the wise Rajrishi Janak, please look into the matters of the royal court for we do not want to be accused of power play or otherwise. We shall let you know of all that is

happening— and is expected— in the given situation" (181). She breaks the gender stereotypes and ventures into male territories and taking on roles with ease. She could easily juggle both family and formal duties effortlessly. Her upbringing helped her to efficiently supervise the courtly matters and take rightful decisions. Mithila never stopped women from taking part into matters other than the household chores and therefore Urmila could discuss courtly matters with her father King Janak. He had always encouraged her to get involved in the affairs of the state. Apart from enduring the pain of separation from her husband for fourteen years, Urmila selflessly took all the familial and formal duties on her head with a smile. She intervened into the courtly matters and handled them efficiently, she also became the pillar of strength for her in-laws in the situation of despair.

**Challenging the Patriarchy**

Kavita Kané's Urmila smashes the patriarchy by questioning their ideals. She fights, argues that even if the outcome may not be what she wants. However, she never lets her voice unheard. She breaks the gender stereotype and vehemently questions the notion of dharma when she confronts the elders and ministers in Ram's hut in the forest. She fights for the sake of Mandavi when Bharat decides to reject the throne of Ayodhya and abandon all to become an ascetic. She questions the patriarchal notions of duty and loyalty which believes in the responsibility taken as a king, as a son, a brother, as a Brahmin, as a Kshatriya and even as a wife but it excludes a husband's duty towards his wife. Nivedita Menon says, "…societies generally value 'masculine' characteristics more highly than 'feminine' ones and at the same time, ensure that men and women who do not conform to these characteristics are continuously disciplined into the appropriate behaviour". She not only accuses the royal family for thrusting patriarchy over feminine gender but also put allegations on the most revered royal family of ancient India. She said,

> So be it Bharat, like your brothers, Ram and Lakshman, you too shall live a life of an ascetic, free from the bond of love and worldly care. Who cares whatever happens to your wife and your family? Today, in this room, we have talked about all sorts of dharma— of the father and the sons, of the king and the princes, of the Brahmins and the Kshatriya, even of the wife for her husband. But is there no

dharma of the husband for his wife? No dharma of the son for his mother? Is it always about the father, sons and brother? (219)

These fundamental questions shook the foundation of the patriarchy and she was immediately interrupted by the sage Kashyap. Her statement was criticised by the sage and it left everyone infuriated. She was rebuked for crossing her boundary and contesting the patriarchal diktats, "Princess, how you dare speak such outrageous words? 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 the greatest minds of Ayodhya!" (219).

Urmila has been represented as someone who does not hesitate to vocal her views. Similarly, in this situation when she expresses her agony and questions the notions set by the men she is condemned by sage Kashyap. Here the sage of the royal court of Ayodhya castigated her for not setting a good example of a daughter-in –law. Her upbringing and liberal mind-set which King Janak had inculcated in her were criticised. Though she was reprimanded by the sage, yet she did not concede to his paradigm of an exemplary daughter-in-law. Instead she countered him, "You are right, Guru Kashyap, Ayodhya is not Mithila. Mithila does not treat her woman so shabbily. And unlike Sage Gargi in my father's royal court, I did not receive any answer to my questions. Nor that I expect any!" (223). Urmila firmly resisted all the injustices and thereby questioned the power and patriarchy. As an insider of the family she accuses the royal family for being cruellest to its own family members.  She demands an answer to all the members of her family and the other members of the court for not trying to intervene when King Dashrath on queen kayikeyi's instruction ordered Ram to go on an exile for fourteen years. She demands, "What were all the elders doing— the other two queens, the ministers, the royal priest and your gurus? No one dared question her till her own son returned to disobey her. Did anyone refuse the king's decision, however much he was forced to take it? Did anyone stop Ram from leaving home? Or did anyone try to stop Sita, knowing that the forest would be an unsafe place for her?" (222).

Similarly, she criticised Ram for making Sita undergo the chastity test after rescuing her from the hands of Ravana. Sita was incessantly subjected to suspicion and she bowed to her husband's will to such an extent where she surrendered herself to prove her innocence. Urmila also questioned the morality of Ram's act that was performing the duty of a king

by setting right standard for the society and the test of fire was essential to prove his wife's fidelity. She condemned Ram for compelling Sita to undergo such public humiliation. She remarked that Ram has forgone his dharma towards his wife or else,

> "Ram should have renounced his throne and his status as king to protect her rather than be answerable to his people who dared to point fingers at his wife, the queen, for not being "chaste" enough. It was a dilemma of a husband versus the king, who is higher, is the moral question? She added bitterly. '…This to a wife who chose to go in exile with him to the forest than stay in the protective luxury of the palace.'" (294)

**Conclusion**

Kavita Kané reclaims this unsung and forgotten character and presents her quest for an identity. She holds a personality of an anchorage to her family both paternal and marital. This is traditionally the duty of a son that she performed. The novel is an account of her journey at various levels— physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual. Urmila registers an acknowledgement of her roles and identifies them within the larger patriarchal and male-dominated order of the day. She asks relevant questions, demands answer, and puts forth her firm point of view and ensures that her voice is heard and listened to. Her life with Lakshman has striking parallels- both are fiercely protective of their siblings, both of their temperaments are similar— warrior like alertness, and the sacrifice each has to make suggest that Kané's Urmila is a feminist who claims an equal footing with men. Her intellectual pursuits, her vehement questioning the patriarchal power structure, her active participation in the affairs of state, her resistance, her keeping the family together during the exile clearly exhibits her character as a feminist with a distinct voice who breaks the gender stereotype. Her search for identity and exploration of the intellectual self in the world of patriarchy reincarnates Urmila as a real woman. She is real in contemporary terms negotiating her way through circumstances to achieve what she wants rather than be passivized as a woman who make glorious sacrifices. The quest for knowledge defines her and she achieves this in her remarkable journey of fortitude. The circumstance of exile and separation were same for both Urmila and Mandavi'. However, it is Urmila defines her life positively. Both of them handle the situation differently as a result Urmila finds a

clear purpose to her life and Mandavi remains trapped and frustrated. Urmila followed a personal philosophy of individual progress, private freedom, and choice. In spite of situations that were stereotypical and subjugating, Urmila rose above each of them through her clear choices. Mandavi on the other hand could not accept the situation which corroded her soul. She isolated herself and lived with anger, bitterness, and disillusionment. Urmila never allowed circumstances overpower her and like a fighter she stood strong above all the limitations and despair. This quest defined her life and choices positively give her a higher purpose.

**Works Cited**

Grimes, J. "Feminism and the Indian Goddess: Different Models", in Smart, N. and Thakur, S., (eds), *Ethical and Political Dilemmas of Modern India*, London: Macmillan, 1993.

Gross, R. "Hindu Female Deities as a Resource for the Contemporary Rediscovery of the Goddess", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46 (September 1978), 3, pp. 269-92.

Kané, Kavita. *Sita's Sister*, New Delhi: Rupa Publication 2014.

Menon, Nivedita. *Seeing Like a Feminist*. New Delhi: Zubaan and Penguin Books, 2012.

Rao, V. N. "The Song of Urmila's Separation: Andhra Women's Song Spotlights Ramayana's Neglected Urmila." Manushi, issue no.153, 2006, pp. 14-21.

Sruti's Book Blog: Author interview: Kavita Kané. Author of Sita's Sister. Web. 13 July 2015

Viswamohan, Ayesha. "Urmila: Existential Dilemma and Feminist Concerns." Indian     Literature, vol. 45, no. 6 (206), 2001, pp. 184–189. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23345768.

**Chapter 5**

# The Other Woman: Menaka, the Divine Prostitute

**Introduction**

The theme of an ascetic involving in high drama of seduction by an *apsara* is a repeated theme employed in the Hindu mythology. The Brahmin ascetics through self-discipline and perseverance control their mind and body in pursuit of a position challenging the supremacy of gods. But the long and arduous penance exerted by the ascetics gets nullified by the sight of women from another world, the *apsaras*, and mythical women possessing legendary and enchanting beauty. The *apsaras* were the celestial nymphs in the court of Indra (Indralok[9]), the God of the gods. They celestial singers and dancers entertained the divinities and the guests in the court of Indra. These nymphs emerged from the episode of ocean of milk when it was churned for nectar. And all the gods and demons refused to accept them as their wives. Due to such denial by both the gods and demons they came to be knows as public women. They were courtesans to the gods and were often employed as pawns by Indra. He sent them on covert missions which involved seduction of ascetics of who he was jealous. Indra is the stealthy instigator behind pitching the *Apsaras* and their alluring charm against the wrath of the ascetics and also powerful human kings and demons. Altogether, whenever Indra felt threatened about his stronghold in the divine domain by any ascetic who could destabilise his position through spiritual powers or by demons that were ambitious enough to rule the heaven through self-mortification, he would send the *Apsaras* to entice them from their path of mediation through libidinal gestures and stripteases. As femme fatales, they mastered the art of eroticism and sensuality to which mortal men relinquished. The image of the apsaras presented in the mythology can be interpreted from the following quote:

> Apsaras are the recipients of sinfulness precisely because they occupy this visceral mythological space. They embody sexuality, its attractions and its dangers, hence they are always a suspicious category, always potentially errant and beyond control. (Dhand, 2000, 188)

---

[9] In Hindu mythology Indralok also called Amravati or simple heaven is referred to be the abode of lord Indra. The dwellers of Amravati are entertained by music, dance and other festivities by the celestial nymphs called apsaras and musicians called gandharvas. Indralok is filled with divinity and luxury and it is the land of pleasure.

Ancient Hindu texts mention about these *apsaras* and their expeditions in distracting sages, kings and demons but simultaneously portrays them as women only to serve pleasure to men as a mission entrusted on them by Indra, for his own interests. Consequently, anguished by this act of *apsaras*, who gave themselves to the whims of Indra, the wrathful Brahmins cursed them, and these curses were never retractable. With the intention of taking sexual advantage of mortal men, he forcefully sent *apsaras* to jeopardize their endeavours for gaining power. These *apsaras* lived in the aegis of Indra and had to obey his demands for their divine welfare. While they were in the act of seducing great sages, sometimes they were struck by the arrow of cupid which made them lovelorn. Being lovesick they allowed themselves to be governed by their carnal instincts. At times, these unions resulted in them bearing children which these *Apsaras* had to abandon at the moment they are born and had return to their celestial abode. In this way, they are also deprived of the bliss of motherhood as they act as instruments in fulfilling the political purpose of the gods. Though the presence of *apsaras* in the mythology represents the inhibited cardinal desires of human beings. Indra, being the king of gods, himself can be seen as running more or less a heavenly brothel which further sheds light on the masculine attitude towards sexual politics in mythological texts. The picture that one gets from the mythic literature is man falls prey of *apsara's* physical charm and simultaneously an image of *apsara* is projected as a seductress trapping a man against his will. The *Apsaras* symbolise men's threat about woman's sexuality because they represent unattached womanhood. A woman is respected for her devotion and subservience towards her husband, her capacity for nurturance is idealised but is equally feared for her sexual powers. Apsaras like, Urvashi, Menaka, Rambha, and Tilottama were feared by men because of their sexuality which was looked upon as a threat to man's self-control and autonomy. These *apsaras* were sexually active and their beauty was used as a medium by Indra, to distract sages from their austerities. The celestial nymphs risked their lives for gods and were often cursed by the sages for making them deviate from their path of spirituality. Their exquisite beauty made the sages engage in sexual encounters with them and later their beauty becomes a curse for them, but the sages were never punished for their behaviour.

The stories of ascetics struggling against the weakness of their flesh on the sight of a celestial nymph is shared by many sages. The apsaras appearing stark naked, unnerving the sages completely which resulted in the birth of an offspring which was abandoned

immediately by both of them. Sage Viswamitra's heavy penance was ruined by the apsara Menaka which resulted in the birth of Shakuntala. Sage Bharadvja lost all his power of control at the sight of Ghrataci and from his semen collected in a leaf casket rose Dronacharya, the master of archery was born. At the sight of the nymph Urvashi, sage Vibandaka dropped his seed into the waters of a lake which was later consumed by a deer and from its womb the horn headed sage Rsyasrnga was born. These incidents were temporary temptations for the sages, plotted against them, where they lose their self-control and the powers which they had earned through harsh penance. Though the sages fall into these momentary infatuations, but they also turn their faces away from cupid and start all over again.

The description of the *apasaras* presented in the sacred narratives has been limited to a seductress and temptress. They play a major role in fulfilling the political purposes of the gods by tantalising the virility of the sages. Though the ascetics collapsed in front of the enthralling beauty, but they also rejected the brief moment of cupidity that led them to self-indulgence. Furthermore, most of the sages controlled their sexual desire by destroying the object of desire that is the *apsaras*, by cursing them. They were often burnt or turned in to stone for exhibiting their overtures. They were considered loose women because they symbolise free and unattached and were shown promiscuous in nature. They were also blamed for causing sexual desire in ascetics who refrained from the worldly pleasure through harsh penance. But women were associated with the worldly pleasure and indulgence of senses. They were consequently viewed as a distracting influence and an evil. Therefore, the *apsaras* were known for their physical beauty and were identified as the source of enjoyment for other men. The sacred texts mention the theme of clash between austerity and cupidity where the *apsaras* were used as pawns by gods to seduce sages and holy men, but these texts rarely attempt to elaborate them as characters in a grand narrative. Mythology has presented these celestial nymphs as devoid of any emotions or free will and very little has been explored about them and their identity has been viewed as heavenly prostitutes who serve according to the interests of gods. Kavita Kané's *Menaka''s Choice* (2016) on the other hand presents a divergent perspective to the stories of *apsaras*. This fiction narrates the tale of the celestial nymph Menaka from her perspective. She has been given an identity of her own where she can express her opinions and make rightful choices in her life, as opposed to the image of Menaka presented in the mythology. Through this retelling, Menaka has been empowered from the role of a mere

celestial prostitute used for seduction to a woman who is equally beautiful and sharp and owns an identity. This retelling is an alternative rereading of the encounter of Viswamitra with the celestial damsel Menaka.

**The Creation of Menaka**

The story begins with the episode of the churning of the ocean of milk where both the gods and demons together churned the depth of the cosmic ocean for obtaining the elixir of immortality. Sage Durvasa cursed the race of gods to which all the gods lost their powers and to regain the powers they had to churn the ocean of milk. The gods (devas) invited the demons (asuras) in helping them to churn of the ocean agreeing in equally diving the nectar of immortality among each other. Mount Mandar was used as the churning rod held at the bottom by lord Vishnu in the incarnation of a tortoise, it bore the weight of the mountain and kept it afloat; giant snake Vasuki wrapped itself around the mountain and acted as a rope to rotate it. While churning, Vasuki vomited poison which could endanger the ocean by contaminating with the elixir, which Lord Shiva drank the poison and held it in his throat resulted in turning his throat blue. The painstaking churning of the ocean came to an end when the cup of elixir appeared and was abruptly snatched by the asuras. Just as the asuras were about to consume the elixir, Mohini (female incarnation of lord Vishnu) came to them as a beautiful woman and as they were busy admiring her beauty Mohini steals the cup of elixir from them. She then gives it to the gods for consumption and with this their strength was restored. This scene of churning of the ocean of milk is seen through the eyes of the protagonist, celestial nymph Menaka. The Pauranic literature mentions that while churning the ocean many treasures were brought from the depth of the ocean and the *apsaras* were one of them. Likewise, in this retelling the author introduces Menaka emerging from the cosmic ocean. But, interestingly, the character of Menaka, has not been deducted to just being an entertainer in the court of Indra. She is the epitome of beauty with brains, as Indra contemplates in one instance

> Menaka, born of the mind, the imagination, from the mind of Lord Brahma, the creator himself. She was his daughter, not all beauty and bewitching charm only, but gifted with exceptional intelligence as well. It would never always be the heady beauteousness with her… Unlike the other heavenly *apsaras*, he would have to be careful with her. (4)

Menaka has been portrayed as a woman with reasons and someone who takes pride in the sense of being a woman. She scorns the male gender for their foolishness, when she recollects how Mohini, the enchantress incarnation of Vishnu, who intervenes on the behalf of Devas and by skilful manoeuvres attained the nectar of immortality from the asuras. She is proud of Mohini's achievement as a woman and her ability to beat devas who are supposed to be powerful and unbeatable. She laughed thinking of the, "foolishness of the male gender; for all the might of the devas, toiling for years, it took the wile of a woman for one moment which won them the day, the final war and that exclusive elixir." (2)

On the other hand, the story introduces Indra as the troublemaker. Soon after the creation of Menaka when Indra tries to woo her, she is vigilant and cautious of his intentions. At the sight of Indra, she warns herself immediately of his dubious nature as, "Weak, spoilt and cruel" (3). With her first interaction with Indra the reader is made aware of her keen intelligence, even when Indra praises for her enthralling beauty and tries to woo her, he realises that she is a strong woman who could not be allured by praises.

**Indralok: The Paradoxical Paradise**

Menaka, as a celestial courtesan took up the role of seductress and temptress in the court of Indra. She was well trained in erotic dance and ways of making love (REF). She was an artist and skilled courtesan to please the gods, her sensuality and beauty made her one of the desired *apsaras* of the heaven. Her life in paradise was filled with luxury but she was not contented. It was the abode of the immortals where everyone could consummate their desires. Hunger, thirst, wealth, youth and pleasure, every emotion and desire were satiated in the heaven. There was Kamdhenu-the wish fulfilling cow which satisfied the hunger, or the magically wealth proving gem called Chintamani, or the holy tree of heaven which blessed it with harmony and health called Kalpatru. Their music played and was made by the *gandharvas* and wine to be served by the *apsaras*. The sole role of the *apsaras* were to entertain and assuage the hunger of lust of gods. The apsaras themselves had no position to pursue their wants and longings. Their existence revolved around proving eternal joy to the gods by pleasing them sensually through erotic dance and gracing their beds. While contemplating her life in the paradise Menaka renders, "…*apsaras*— born immortal,

designed to please and give pleasure, but never to seek it". (10) Nobody could abstain themselves from the tantalising sight of these enchanting nymphs; men, rishis, asuras and even gods would surrender themselves to these irresistible sensuous beauties called *apasaras*. But even though they were desired by many, the *apsaras* had no control over their lives and had to follow the instructions given by Indra.

Though surrounded by abundance of opulence but they ceased to fascinate Menaka. Beauty, wealth, novelty, and pleasure were everywhere but nothing could make her happy. She was a heavenly delight to be felt but never possessed and within this erotic life where she had only to offer pleasure to others, she herself longed for a company. But soon she found love in the gandharva king Vishwavasu. Vishwavasu was a great musician, philosopher, and scholar under the tutelage of sage Yagnavalkya. He loved her with rare possessiveness because in the heaven everything is shared and one cannot possess anything, they can have everything but own nothing. But Menaka dared to marry Vishwavasu secretly. Menaka and Vishwavasu's love was filled with heated passion and Vishwavasu was smitten by her deadly beauty and sensuality. He appreciated her overt sexuality and surrendered to her ways of making love. She teased him and he conceded to her alpha female characteristics. He accepted her the way she was, one who was never shy to express her own desires and choices.

> Her searching lips followed the hot trail left behind by her flirting fingers, scorching his skin, and making his body writhe with a burning, inflammable passion. Through half-lidded, lust-laden eyes, he saw her, felt her moving, sensuously slithering further down, her lovely face flushed, her mouth still smiling wickedly, her hair fanning out in glorious abandon. He groaned, moving in slow, quickening rhythm. This was heaven… 'O God!' he moaned… 'Not God, it's me Menaka, (13)

Though, in the codes of the Indralok, the *apsaras* and gandharvas were not supposed to get married or commit to any relationship and Indra did not take this news obligingly as the queen of the *apsaras* Rambha informed him about the secret wedding also incited him with her spiteful intent. This news induced anger in Indra towards Menaka and Vishwavas for transgressing the codes of conduct set for apsaras in the heaven.

> 'This is Indralok, there are gandharvas and *apsaras* who love and make love but never marry!' seethed Indra, looking at Menaka with rising disbelief. 'Both of you

109

are available to anyone who have the strength to claim you—you have been made beautiful young and immortal—but for the pleasure of everyone. Not just yours! There is nothing like private marital bliss here, it doesn't exist! How dare you break the rules!' he continued vehemently turning furiously on Vishwavasu. (14)

But Menaka was prepared to face the wrath of Indra and somewhere she knew about the soft corner Indra had for her only because she was different from other *apsaras*. She was desired by everyone in the heaven because of her unparalleled beauty and intellect. She was a rare combination of beauty with brains and Indra was jealous of Vishwavasu, to whom Menaka has given her heart. Menaka knew how to woo men using her charm similarly she bewitched Indra with her charm as a defence. She seduced Indra with convincing words as wit was her powerful weapon of enticement. She apprised,

> 'I am to blame for this. I have violated the moral principle of my duty as an apsara,' she started slowly, gazing straight and sufficiently pleading at Indra's incensed face, arresting his anger. Her voice was soft and sweet. It was filled with the right dose of remorse and self-acceptance. I broke the boundaries set up by this world and favoured one man over others…I seduced him; I couldn't help myself… 'Our passion was quenched but never died and to save ourselves, we got married!' she continued, but I did it for you, for the devas, for Amravati…' Indra looked puzzled and Menaka saw her chance to swiftly explain. 'How can I make others happy if I am miderable? And so I married Vishwavasu so that I could stay happy, and keep others happy too. 'By marrying Vasu, I shall not shrink from my duties, I promise. I shall carry on what is expected from an *apsara*. I am celestial woman and our desires are vast!' she added, with a clever flourish. (16)

Menaka knew that she could easily convince Indra with her witty answers and simultaneously Indra also allowed her to convince him. She blatantly conveyed her choices and concurrently persuaded Indra to also accept her choices. But her happiness was momentary when she realised, she was pregnant with Vishwavasu's child. Moreover, it was unacceptable of any *apsara* to beget in the heaven. The heaven had its own codes to be followed by the *apsaras* and gandharvas and according to the codes *apsaras* could never conceive from lust, but they have to be in love. They were just nymphs of lust and are not supposed to fall in love; they were trained to be heartless and were meant for momentary pleasure. They were taught to be selfish and cared only for themselves. But

this time Menaka lost herself in love blindly and this transgression of heavenly code made her go through many ordeals. Both Menaka and Vishwavasu knew the implications once Indra would come to know about the pregnancy. Furthermore, Indralok had no place for children and neither *apsaras* nor gandharvas were allowed to keep their children. This reference can be found when both Menaka and Vishwavasu were discussing the aftermath of the pregnancy,

> '…because you are not meant to be a father. Nor me a mother. We can conceive but never foster a child. You have fathered other children, Vasu, haven't you? She looked wistfully at Vasu. 'But were you allowed to bring up any? They were looked after by rishis or childless kings. We are but a gandharva and an *apsara*, destined to give pleasure to all but ourselves. And it is in such a Heaven we live.' (36)

Indralok never worked without Indra's permission and bringing a child in Indralok was considered a sin. When the news of pregnancy struck Indra, he did not react gleefully and ordered the couple to let go the child. He ordered, 'You can't have everything, Menaka. You have your love, your husband, but you cannot keep your baby here. Heaven does not allow it…' (46) When Menaka refutes back saying heaven allows gods to marry and beget and her child will be no different, to which Indra retorts, 'Because you may be an immortal apsara, but you are not a devi! … Here each one has a role to function, a duty to do. Your is to entertain and amuse' (46) Indra clarifies her role in Indralok which was been confined to a role of seductress born to please and amuse but never allowed to become someone's wife or mother a child. He clearly specifies her purpose in the heaven where she is just a mere apparatus functioning for the flourishing erotic life in Indralok. Here Menaka again condemns Indra and the codes of conduct instituted by him in the Heaven. She says,

> You made me a woman that glorifies beauteous creation, yet so rudimentary. I am that beautiful, eternally young woman who believes she lives with the blessed in Heaven. You gave me all the weapon of love, sex and desire but disarmed me of my capability of conscious choice and decision, why? I can be a woman, but never a wife or a mother. Just a sexual slave. A whore. (47)

Menaka criticizes the regulations of the Heaven which lack social equality. All the beings of Heaven were not treated equally and *apsaras* lived in heaven only to serve the gods and

submit to their whims; they were not allowed to experience motherhood. They were born women only to offer sexual services to gods. Menaka goes further criticizing the perspective of Indra when he stated that, 'Seducing dangerous men to save the world is not whoring it is salvation!' (47)  She denounces him saying that, 'There is a difference between making love and making intrigue! To use my sex appeal to exploit men is intrigue, its whoring! You make me do that! You make me compromise myself for your gains. You use me not just to lure men to have sex but to entice them away from their goals, to lead them astray. It is seduction at its worse. It is not an opinion I have; it is an imposition. And you deprive me of my right to freedom to love, beget and rear… if you made a woman, why can't I not be a mother too?'(47) Here Menaka rebukes Indra for using her as a mere tool of seduction for his own gains. Whenever Indra would feel threatened of any powerful king and sage and fear of losing his throne, he would send *apsaras* on a mission of enticing them and deviate them from their path of salvation. And the *apsaras* were bound to follow his instructions irrespective of their wishes. Indra divested them from their own freedom, he controlled them and even their bodies. He made them women of unappalled beauty but deprived them from the rights a woman could have, to love, marry and even experience motherhood. Menaka not only voiced against Indra's opinions but also questioned the duties assigned to them which lacked equality. But finally, she had to abandon her daughter as commanded by Indra, 'I shall forcibly throw the child out from her' (48).

**The Confrontation for Love**

Abandoning her daughter immediately after she was born left an intense scar within Menaka. Her guilt and agony for making the decision of abandoning her daughter ate her up from inside. Besides the regulations of Indralok never allowed the children from the *apsaras* and gandharvas to stay and grow up there. They were sent off to childless kings and sages and likewise Menaka when gave birth to a daughter, she was immediately sent to Rishi Sthulkesh's ashram and there her daughter was named Pramadvara. Moreover, the pain of detaching herself from her daughter was exhausting and she could never forgive Indra for the crime of separating a mother from her daughter. But Indra on the other hand had separate plans for her and for him the thought of begetting children by the *apsaras* and gandharvas could disturb the ecosystem of Indralok. He was jealous of Vishwavasu and Menaka's love and also felt threatened of their audacities for transgressing the codes of heaven. Indra waited for instances where he could detach both

the lovers and when finally Rambha accused Vishwavasu of taking advantage of her while he was intoxicated, Indra took no other chances but curse Viswavashu, transforming him into a one-eyed monster Kabandh and banished him from the heaven to reside on the earth. Even in this instance Menaka did not stop to voice her feelings against Indra and confronted him. She challenged him to bring her loved one back to the heaven because she realised the conspiracy plotted against her Vishwavasu where he was unjustly accused of molestation. Menaka even demanded justice in the presence of everyone in the court of Indra and vows not to obey any rules and orders of Indra until and unless he brings Viswavashu back. She retorts,

> And if you cannot deliver justice to me and my expelled Vasu, then I announce right now, right here, that I refuse to dance in this court till Vasu returns. My lord, I came here today in respect to your orders to see me in court. From henceforth, I shall not attend this court, our royal orders, or the expectations from me as a heavenly courtesan notwithstanding. You are not my king! (78)

Menaka successfully ignored all the duties assigned to her in the heaven, she stopped going to the dance practices and stopped performing in the court and refrained herself from pleasing other gods. She boycotted herself from all the social relations and diktats allocated on her by Indra. She vowed not to obey Indra and would never forgive him for separating her from her only love Vishwavasu and also snatching her child from her. Her life meant nothing to her, and every moment spent in the heaven made her recollect the sweet memories spent with her Vasu (Vishwavasu), each memory made her feel the importance of being a woman. She realised that the role allocated to her by Indra is a role that equally victimises her, deprives her from the bigger role any woman gets to play of a wife and a mother. Furthermore, for Menaka living in heaven became a place no less than hell and she wanted to escape from this living hell.

**From Seduction to Love**

On the other hand, day by day sage Vishwamitra born as Kshatriya king Kaushik was becoming powerful by practicing austerities. King Kaushik once tried to steal sage Vasisth's wish fulfilling cow Nandini by the force of arms whereas sage Vasisth fought back with the power of spirituality and defeated the king. King Kaushuk then realised that material power has no match in front of spiritual prowess. Thus, he renounced his kingdom and started dwelling in the forest exalting penance on himself in the motive to

become more powerful than sage Vasisth. Moreover, with time he became so powerful that he created another Indralok apart from the one ruled by Indra and this threatened Indra of his position as the king of heaven. King Kaushik performing difficult austerities became powerful and earned the title Vishwamitra, but he was few steps away from becoming a *brahmarishi* which required a higher degree of penance. Indra knew the dedication Vishwamitra had in becoming a *brahamarishi* and he would go to any extent in accomplishing the title. But Indra wanted to distract him from his path to salvation and he knew that only Menaka could entice him with her beauty and deviate him from his path. Menaka, on the other hand took this assignment as a temporary escape from the heaven where spending each day for her in the absence of Vishwavasu was like a nightmare. Finally, she agrees to go as herself without any lies and pretence, and even solves all the possible faults which would arouse from this seduction process with her exceptional intelligence

Menaka took the task of seducing sage Viswamitra, distracting him from his deep meditation and penance by deceiving him in the play of cupidity, but in consequence she fell in love with Viswamitra. Indra wanted Menaka to trap Vishwamitra into the domestic life, temporarily weakening their body resulting in the reassertion of the life process which he has so firmly renounced. She appeared naked in front of him while he was meditating and successfully seduced him. But her assignment became a bliss for her, and she cherished each moment spent with the mortal sage. Vishwamitra from a stranger became her lover, her mentor, her husband and eventually father to her daughter Shakuntala. Moreover, sage Vishwamitra treated her with respect, gave her a societal identity by marrying her and he had never felt so complete before in his life. For Vishwamitra love changed his life for the first time and he was happy leaving the path of austerities and starting a family of his own. He admired her and respected her profession and postulated that there is no shame in her profession. He further made her believe that Indralok has just assigned her the role of a seductress, but she was more than that, she was an artist. She was well versed in the nine emotional essences of Indian drama, the natyashastra. As Vishwamitra says,

> You are an artist, Menaka, all apsaras are. They are prolific proponents of art, not dissolute dancers entertaining vulnerable victims! But that does not mean what you did till now was unrighteous or unchaste. You are neither inferior nor unworthy. You are a celestial being, Menaka, you were born divine, from the mind

of the purest; he stroked her neck. 'And you are my inspiration, my strength. How more can I explain that I love you, respect you and am so proud of you'… 'I meant every word I just said. I want you to believe them.' (151)

Menaka's duty was to destroy sage Vishwamitra but she loved him deeply and could not bring any destruction towards his path of becoming a brahmarishi. As a result, she always encouraged him to practice his meditation and did not want him to put on him the responsibilities of the domestic life. She always convinced him to choose his ambition, 'You are destined for greatness!' She cried. 'That is why you became Vishwamitra from Kaushik. I love you, Kaushik, I always shall. But you do not stop loving yourself, for what you could be,' she persuaded, floundering in frustration.' (170)

Furthermore, the job assigned to her by Indra also demanded to beget a child from Vishwamitra. But there was also an agenda behind this act; that is after the child is born, Menaka had to immediately return to the heaven abandoning the child and rejecting Vishwamitra which would wreck him and trap him in the domestic responsibilities for lifetime. But Menaka wanted to spend her life with Vishwamitra and to buy some more time for her stay in the earth; cleverly she convinced Indra to let her stay with the sage until she became pregnant. In the end, Menaka made a choice and left Vishwamitra for his own good. She feared that the domestic life would destroy all his acquired powers and she did not want to destroy the man whom she loved more than herself. Moreover, every time she saw her daughter Shakuntala and Vishmitra's infinite love for her, a sense of guilt hovered over her. 'She hated herself for what she was doing to the man, of what she has done. She brought down a great man to his most shameful nadir as he grovelled in his love for her. She had snatched his future from him to gain her present, but her past stalked her. Her remorse, her shame no longer permitted her to continue her pretence.' (170)

She contemplated and revealed her truth to him and wanted him to hate her for the advantage she took of him. She disclosed the reason behind sending her to him by Indra. She used cruel words to make him hate her more, she said, 'I was fed up with you, I was fed up of staying. What have you given me Kaushik?'(195). Though she loved him deeply, but she decided to go back for his own good. She accepts his decision to give their daughter to Rishi Kanva. In the end, both part ways while keeping the immense love they have each other, along with the memories of them.

**The Mother Denied of Motherhood**

Menaka like any other woman wanted to enjoy motherhood but both the times she conceived; she was denied of that right. First, when she got pregnant with Vishwavashu's daughter Padamprava, she immediately had to denounce the baby once she was born because according to the rules and regulations of heaven, celestial nymphs are never allowed to keep their children. This act made her question herself and the laws of Indralok, guilt, and remorse filled her for complying with the codes of heaven and sending off her daughter. Second, when life gave her another chance to have a family of her own, a husband and a daughter, she was again forced to leave her husband and her daughter because of the mission she was sent for was already accomplished. Indra called her back to heaven and she convinced him and managed to get few more years of stay with Vishwamitra. But she realised that she was becoming the hindrance for Vishwamitra in his path of becoming a *brahmarishi* and with a heavy heart she decided to leave for his own good.

But irrespective of the fact that Menaka could not keep any of her daughters with her but her love for her daughter gets established in many instances. When she got the news of Pradamvara's dying stage when bit by a snake she gave her own years of life by taking advantage of her boon of infinite life. She convinced Yama to save her daughter's life. ' I am an immortal, I cannot be subjected to death, but I have enough years of life to donate to my daughter whom I bore from Vasu, Can I not give a bit of my living breath to my dying daughter?'(92). When Menaka saw her daughter opened her eyes, she realized the value of life and the brutality of death. She felt the emotion of being a mother, even though for just one day. Similarly, she comes to help Shakuntala in her deep crisis. Once king Dushyanta went hunting in the forest and was smitten by the beauty of Shakuntala and immediately both of them fell in love. They married secretly and Dushyant returned to his kingdom promising her to return and take her as the queen of Hastinapur.  But even after a year Dushyant did not return and by them, Shakuntala gave birth to Bharat. Shakuntala in despair sets off to the capital of Hastinapur to remind of their past love but Dushyant could not recollect Shakuntala and Shakuntala decided to bring up her child without a father. Shakuntala possessed the same presence of mind of her mother. As I said earlier, you are a braver person than I was (256). Menaka thinks that it would never be an easy task for Shakuntala to manage everything single-handedly. But Shakuntala questions

her mother''s credentials. Like mother, the daughter also made a choice. Menaka is even proud of her daughter.

**Conclusion**

Menaka in *Menaka's Choice* is a woman of exquisite beauty and intelligence. Her perspectives are righteous, and she is very expressive about her feelings and emotions. She owns a strong character and questions the unreasonable codes of the Indralok. Menaka voices against the unjust like she strongly defends Rambha another *apsara* when she was brutally raped by Ravan, the asura king. Although Rambha was the reason for the loss of Vasu, yet she tried to convince Rambha not to concede to seduce Vishwamitra on the whims of Indra. She feared the wrath of Vishwamitra and warned her, but Rambha accepted the proposal made by Indra and was consequently cursed by the sage. She was turned into a stone by Vishwamitra, when she tried to seduce him to break his meditation, as he was about to attain his goal of becoming the Brahmarishi. Menaka in this novel is just not a heavenly prostitute whose role is limited to an entertainer and a pleasure giver, but she also has a story to narrate. She is a character more than a nymph but also a lover, wife and a mother. Everytime love has touched her she has also been denied of the love because her duty as heavenly courtesan did not allow her to get involved into something permanent. Her story in the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana,* and puranas have been placed in a marginalized position and whatever little is described is confined in the clutches of mythical tale of seduction but Kavita Kané gives voice to the voiceless Menaka.

The patriarchal society established their own ideology and norms and is evident in many works of male writers. But diverging ideas take its form when female writers present their characters as the work differs from the dominant patriarchal ideologies. This is evident in Menaka's Choice as Menaka questions the dominant ideology. As a result, divergent ideas develop out of it and Menaka lives with choice.

**Works Cited**

Bhattacharya, Birendra Kumar. "The Mahabharata- An Epic of Santarasa" *The Mahabharata Revisited*. R.N. Dandekar, Ed. New Delhi: Sahïtya Akademi .1990.

BN.K. & Sinha, S.N. *History of Prostitution in India*. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1994.

Dhand, Arti. "Poison, Snake, the Sharp Edge of a Razor: Yet the Highest of Gurus. Defining Female Sexuality in the *Mahabharata*". PhD. Dissertation. Montreal: Mcgraw Hill University, 2000.

Dhand, Arti. "Women, Smelly Ascetics, and Reproductive Method: Reflections on a Theme in the Mahabharata." Paper Presented at the AAR San Francisco. March (1999), pp.1-40.

J, Gonda. "Ascetics and Courtesans". *Selected Studies*, Vol. 4. (1975), pp.223-     225.

Kané, Kavita. Menaka's Choice, New Delhi: Rupa Publication., 2016.

L, Gouri P. "Mahabharata: A Mythology in the Making (I)", *Bulletin of Deccan College Research Institute*, Vol.44. (1985), pp.83-93.

Pandit, S, P. *Atharvaveda*. ed., Krishnadas Academy, 1989.

Pattanaik, Devdutt. *The Goddess in India: The Five Faces of the Eternal Feminine*, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 2000.

Sheth, Surabhi D. "Woman's Sexuality: A Portrayal from Ancient Indian Literature" Manushi Special Issue: *Indian Cultures and Faith Traditions*. New Delhi: Manushi Trust, (July-August 1992), pp. 14-17.

**Chapter 6**

**From Fisherwoman to Queen: Satyavati's Journey of Power and Politics**

**Introduction**

Epics in general are male-centric narratives, celebrating masculine valour, greatness, and victories. Though, women are integral to the plot of the narratives, the textual space offered to them are minimal, often restricting them to the status of "other" in the heavily gendered narratives of mythology. Women in mythology are usually side-lined to the periphery, with no sense of purpose imparted to their existence and most importantly their voices are silenced. But when these mythical narratives are subverted and interpreted through the voices of these 'other' women characters, they open the possibility of a new discourse where the status of 'otherness' is recognized. The patriarchal hegemony has always side-lined women to a subservient position. In the hands of patriarchy, women have been represented according to the defined traditions of men. As Rey Chow in her article "Gender and Representation" writes,

> In men's act of representation women are often used as symbols for meanings men want to convey — goddesses and femme fatales being the two extreme examples. Women, in other words, have all along been objectified as the very devices of representation, as the signs that bear specific moral or artistic significance in a world created by men….Being the means with which men represent themselves to themselves and the world, women are made to remain, by and large passive. (2001, 39)

Similarly, the character of Satyavati was given minimal scope in the narrative to fathom the gravity of her presence in the Mahabharata. Although, she was one of the prime agencies in the development of the plot of the myth, yet very little is written about her in the dominant narrative, and she is condemned for her ambition. Moreover, Pradip Bhattacharya also writes that the stories of Satyavati's deeds hardly find any acknowledgement in the *Mahabharata* but are elaborately mentioned in texts like *Harivamsa* and in Devi Bhagvata Purana (2006, 22). Satyavati manipulated the course of her life according to her ambition. She moved up the social ladder by marrying King

Shantanu and became the grand matriarch of *Mahabharata*, As Vanamala Bhawalkar writes,

> Satyavati, though a minor character in the Mahabharata had an important role in the life of the venerable Bhishma, and also as the mother of the great sage Vyasa who appears throughout the Mahabharata as the most influential and highly revered adviser to the Kauravas and Pandavas whenever necessary. (1999, 397)

The character of Satyavati can be analysed as someone who moved beyond the domestic space to public by making choices, taking actions, and acting freely. She also moulded her future from being a fisherman's daughter to a queen of a royal lineage of Hastinapur. Thus this exceptional character and her actions can be found similar to women in the twenty first century.Other than Satyavati there are other characters like Kunti, Draupadi, Amba, and Gandhari from *Mahabharata* who stood out and unwaveringly asserted their rights. Therefore it is significant to study the character of Saytyavati in detail and this chapter looks into the revisionist narrative, *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* (2017) by Kavita Kané, which subverts the patriarchal opinions and re-examines the events of Mahabharata from the perspective of Satyavati, the grand matriarch of the Kuru dynasty. The most intriguing purpose of Satyavati presence in the text can be understood — firstly, without her the events in the Mahabharata which led to the war would never have occurred in the first place and secondly, Satyavati is the only female progenitor of both the Kauravas and Pandavas, who fought the war against each other. She created her own bloodline, and this makes her a principal character. Kané presents Satyavati as the bold woman who is unapologetic of using sexuality to her advantage. In one of the interviews with Indian Today, Kané´ expresses her views on Satyavati,

> When I read the Mahabharata for the first time in Class VIII, I recall hating Satyavati in childish anger. Later, almost a decade later, I found her intriguing and almost admired the spunkiness of this remarkable person—a fisher-girl who saw to it that she became the queen of Hastinapur—ruling it and its people and the various characters in the Mahabharata, thus making her probably the most powerful woman in the epic... If you consider the Mahabharata as a political drama, Satyavati comes across as the most politically sharp person, whose sway on the other characters and the events to come is far-reaching. (Matra)

Kavita Kané here in this re-telling brings forth a divergent dynamic to the narrative of Mahabharata that empowers the ignored character of Satyavati by bringing her to the centre. She uncovers the plight of Satyavati, her desires and disappointments, which were suppressed in the traditional narrative of Mahabharata. Through this retelling Kané re-examines the character putting forward her struggles, negotiations, and resistance that she undertook in order to transform her life from rags to riches. The journey of Satyavati exemplified by Kané portrays her as a bold, independent, free-spirited, and sexually assertive woman who emerges from the periphery resisting the oppression and builds a life of her own. Satyavati had full control over her life and she lived it on her own terms. Moreover, she also attains a life she had always wanted to by breaking several stereotypes and an embodiment of an empowered woman who raised herself from the status of an ordinary fisherwoman who was teased for her physical appearance and the stench of fish that emanated from her body, to becoming the queen of Hastinapur. The story of her compliance with two of the most powerful men transformed her life and led to her personal and political advantage. Her story overturns the dominant power structures of the society. Satyavati from being a mere fisherwoman, she rose to become the autocrat of the fate of Hastinapur.

According to the *Harivamsa*, Satyavati's is the daughter of King Upacharya Vasu of Chedi dynasty, and Adrika, a cursed *apsara* turned fish. Adrika swallowed the semen of the Chedi king and when found by the fishermen chieftain Dasaraj, he cut open the womb of fish Adrika to find twins. When this news reached the king of Chedi, he kept the male child and gave the female child (Satyavayti) to the fisher folks. Dashraj then adopts Satyavati, also known as 'Matsya-gandha', one who smells like fish. She is also called 'Kali' because of her dark complexion (Bhattacharya 2006, 22). Herein, Kané re-writes a fictional journey of Satyavati suppressed by the patriarchal power politics. This retelling brings forth the identity of Satyavati lurking in the periphery, uncovering a strong human side of her personality.

**Satyavati as 'Kali' and 'Matsya-gandha'**

Kavita Kané begins the novel with the birth of Satyavati, rejected by her father and being given away to a fisherman. Satyavati thus from the beginning becomes a victim of

marginalization. Firstly, king of Chedi disowns her for being a girl and secondly because of her body complexion, which in comparison to her twin brother was very dark. In the male-dominated society like India the image of women is created by men according to their needs. Uma Chakravarti in her essay "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India" opines that, "Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the orgainising principles of the brahmanical social order and are closely interconnected"[10]. She asserts that caste system is a social stratification system prevalent in India and it discriminatory not only towards people from lower caste but also women of both upper classes or from Dalit groups. The maintenance of the caste was checked by controlling the sexuality of women and this was done by marrying them within the same caste. The brahmanical patriarchy was concerned in controlling sexuality of women from upper class in order to ensure there is no mixing of castes. On the other hand, the sexuality of women from lower castes was not strictly controlled but the only concern in regard to their sexuality was that they were not accepted as wives of upper caste men. Although upper caste men were not prohibited from cohabiting with women from lower castes, but marriage was an unacceptable option. Similarly, Satyavati was ostracised on these parameters. First, she was rejected by her own father for her gender and dark color. Second, she was marginalised by the society for her belonging to the lower caste and third, sage parashar cohabited with no promises of marriage. Moreover, in this retelling, she defied all the notions of caste and gender and asserted herself as a strong individual.

Satyavati was marginalised from the mainstream by 'othering' her to the periphery. King Vasu by exercising his power not only rejects her but also excludes her from a social identity. He was too ashamed to accept Satyavati as his daughter and so he decided to give her away to the childless fishermen Chieftain Dasaraj. Dasaraj who longed for a child was overwhelmed by the proposal but was equally disappointed to perceive the fact that the king disowned the girl child. Since the time Dasaraj became her father, with indecipherable joy pledged to give her a life she deserved. Dasaraj while holding the baby in his arms contemplates,

> I shall never abandon you, he promised as he saw the dark eyes look up solemnly at him. I shall give you the love and life you deserve. I could not do much for your mother, but you are born the daughter of a king— shamelessly unacknowledged

---

[10] See Chakravarti, Uma. "Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State". *Economic and Political Weekly*. 14. 28 (1993): 579-585.

and deserted— but you shall be my princess. I shall never break your trust. I shall make you the royal princess. I shall make you the royal princess that you are. And one day, the queen that you deserve to be (5)

King Chedi's rejection played an important role in Satyavati's life. It changed the course of her destiny; she was not accepted by the royal household and instead grew up in a fisher community. Her life was engulfed with poverty, with no money, no food, no proper shelter, and unhygienic living conditions. She earned her livelihood by ferrying people to and fro on the river Yamuna and catching fish.  She detested her life of discomfort and impoverishment. She also despised the rich people who lived a life of luxury whereas her life was bound to hard work, sacrifices and beggary. This can be understood when Satyavati expresses her discontent,

> There was a sordid, undisciplined feeling about the village which she had got accustomed to yet loathed. The street was littered with trash and fish scales … Everything about this place is disgusting. There are no roads any longer, she thought savagely as she waded through the slush. In summer, the track would be dry and dusty, and during the rains, like now, it was an open gutter, exposing them to disease, stink and discomfort. She detested the way the nobles and royalty lived their lives, while she was cursed to a life hard work and stench, with no hope of ever bridging the gap. (10)

Kali (Satyavati) was conscious of her marginalisation, along with the people of Hastinapur who had marginalised her, she was also isolated within her community of fisher people. She was teased, bullied for the awkward smell of her body and her dark complexion. In isolation she found peace in drifting her boat on river Yamuna, but her identity remained unheard and undesired.

> Kali noticed how a passing lady visibly shrank from her, her face twisted in distaste, clamping her nose with her hand as if to keep the odour at bay. Kali was used to being treated as a pariah, the lowest of the low, only allowed a small vestige of dignity once she turned into the lane of the fisher folk. She was after all, their chieftain's daughter. There was a certain regal-ness about the girl as she strode briskly with her head held high, her eyes openly contemptuous. (11)

The beauty of Satyavati does not comply with the standard notion of feminine beauty. The idea of feminine beauty is created by patriarchy which propagates fair skin and sharp

123

feature, but she was unconventionally beautiful and broke the stereotypical association of beauty with fair skin,

> She was dusky and ravishing, with broad shoulders, a provocative bust, a small waist, voluptuous hips, and long legs which were taut and tense... Her thick, dark hair rested loosely on her bare shoulders... She was not classically beautiful: her mouth was too wide, her lips thin, her nose long and too sharp for perfect beauty. (54)

**The Loss of Innocence: Discovery of Sexual Freedom**

Satyavati earned her livelihood by commuting people across the river Yamuna. Here she met sage Parasara whom she ferried across the river and this encounter changed her life completely. On the boat in the mid-river, struck by the exceptional beauty of Satyavati an irresistible passion engulfed Parasara and he wanted to engage in coitus with her. Although Kali was young, but her maturity and farsightedness can be understood by the way she manoeuvred this episode into something to her advantage. It was her ambition that made her wise enough not to fall prey to Parasar's passion, instead she chose to bargain in favour of her own gain. Kali does not immediately submit to the lustful desire of the sage, but she wanted to utilise the sage's power and gave him two conditions. First, to remove the pungent odour emanating from her body, and second, her virginity should remain intact after she bore him his son.

She retained her presence of mind and realised that refusing the powerful sage may cause harm and satisfying him may grant her something unattainable. Therefore, she requests the sage to remove the stinky smell of fish from her body,

> 'You have magical powers', she said as she furrowed her brows, thoughtfully. 'I smell of fish. Can you remove it?' she asked. People flee from my stink. That is one of the reasons why I have very few admirers,' she said. 'Who wants to make love to a foul-smelling fisher girl?' 'I do' he urged. 'You shall never regret it.' She gazed at him, her heart hammering. Was his power for real? 'Then make me fragrant, she said, more out of curiosity than as a challenge. She knew he was

oblivious to her faint stench, and nothing would dissuade him now; yet, she wanted to bide her time. (17)

Parasar granted her an intoxicating smell which could attract any man she wanted. He played a very prime character in Satyavati's life as he taught her to be unapologetic about one's desires and sexuality. Parasar made her believe that her beauty was unparalleled and using her beauty to entice men she desired for should not be taken as a transgression. He says, ""Can you smell the perfume? 'It's emanating from your body. You will no longer be the stinking fisher girl. Matsyagandha will now be Yojanagandha; your new, musky fragrance will waft for miles together, and shall entice anyone whom you want.'" (18) Satyavati ignited in Parasar carnal desires and with her presence of mind she handled the powerful Brahmin's passion without submitting to him completely. She conveyed that she was still under the authority of her father and a virgin. Moreover, she was also perturbed by the thought that her maidenhood will be questioned if she fornicated with him. To this Parasar agrees to her second condition— assuring her of re-intact virgin status and also promises that the illegitimate son she will bear would be famous and learned. Parasar says, "He will be our child, Matsyagandha. He will be so exceptional that no one will dare call him illegitimate…. You are an extraordinary girl yourself. You can never be bound by conventions or be tied down by others. You are born to rule, princess!" (19). Satyavati believed that this could be the only chance that would change the course of her life forever. She realized that satisfying the needs of the powerful Parasara will grant her unobtainable boons and so she wisely used her sexuality to empower herself. Kané writes this as: "This was her opportunity. He could turn her unprivileged life into an unusual one. If she had to give, she would take as well." (20).

The brief encounter with Rishi Parashar made her aware of the power of her sexuality. This episode transformed her from a young and innocent girl to a sexually assertive woman, "… She was rediscovering herself, unrepentant and unapologetic about her deeds and her decisions. Desire does not shame her, nor did lust overawe her. After the episode with Parashar, she knew it was her sharpest weapon to cleave and carve a better life for herself" (27). Kavita Kané through her retelling presents Satyavati as a sexually assertive woman and her sexuality became an expression of empowerment. She was a new Kali, with an intoxicating fragrance and bold appearance. The young men of her community were wooed by her beauty and she could notice all eyes on her. She was admired by people who earlier turned their noses on her. Besides, she unapologetically pursued men

125

according to her own terms and desires. She also began to experience a new sense of freedom where she could make choices about her own body and pleasures. She challenged the confines of social expectations designated on women. She was not ashamed of her transgressions but rather she took pride in them. She also countered the marker of 'virginity', the social diktat adhered to women, "She could not care less; she could not help but laugh at how a sheer skin was considered a trophy for men to want and venerate" (27).

Satyavati's new perspective towards freedom adds a feminist overtone to her character— first, she enjoyed her sexual liberation without any guilt and apprehension and second, she countered the notions on female sexuality assigned by the society to women. Usually women's sexuality is recognised as passive and suppressed by the society. Moreover, sexual pleasure is considered a male domain and women transgressing this marker on sexuality are considered obscene. As M. McIntosh (1978) claimed that "women's sexuality is suppressed by men or in the interests of patriarchy" (64), and due to this suppression women "are prevented from realising their full potential" (64). She also asserted that yearning for carnal desires and coitus by men "is an aspect of male privilege" (62). Therefore, women's desire has not been allowed to be expressed like men and so they have been submerged by men according to their needs. But here we find Satyavati unapologetic about her sexual desires. She, like any feminist believes that women too have the right for sexual freedom. As A. Lorde puts it,

> Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama. For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of racist, patriarchal and anti-erotic society (1982, 96).

Therefore, this freedom gave Satyavati the power to smash the shackle of patriarchal subjugation and zeal to experience new perspectives of living and becoming. It opened new possibilities of freedom and opportunities.

**The Becoming: 'Queen' of Hastinapur**


Donning an intoxicating fragrance and courage, driven by the resentment of rejection by her biological father, she manoeuvred her future into becoming the queen of Hastinapur. Satyavati knew how to use her sex appeal to seduce men to meet her ends. Similarly, she used her beauty to entice the king of Hastinapur, Shantanu into marrying her. She admirably mapped a scheme that could give her a luxurious life and settlement. She has a clear ambition and farsighted proposition which she successfully implemented into getting whatever she dreamt of. On the one hand, King Shantanu smitten by Satyavati's beauty wanted to love her and on the other hand, Satyavati did not accept his advances immediately but utilised the situation to make a deal for her. Furthermore, when she came to know about the status of king Shantanu, she could not think of anything else but wished to become the young queen to the old king. As Kané writes, "Kali drew in a deep breath, inhaling the salty scent of success. She would not allow ambition to be a dirty word. It would cleanse her, empower her and be the cause of her rebirth. She was sick of poverty; it made her ill. She needed a cure; she wanted wealth, which was power. She wanted power, too." (60) Satyavati was determined that the encounter with king Shantanu should not become a mere sexual escapade. She didn't want herself to be an object of pleasure in exchange of luxury, but she wanted power. She strategically used her beauty as an effective agency to negotiate her demands fearlessly. Kané here again depicts Satyavati as a stern feminist who smashes the patriarchal ideals on feminine beauty and sexuality. She writes,

> Satyavati realized the power of love and making love – a means to an end.  First Parashar, then Shantanu; she had got what she wanted from both men. Some would deem it immoral, but virtue was a quality invented by men to suit their needs.  If men could use women, why couldn't it be the other way round?  Sex and beauty were the weapons of seduction that she could, and had, wielded in conflict and contest (137).

Finally, love-struck Shantanu capitulated and proposed to marry Satyavati but, she once again exhibits her distinctive far-sightedness and insists that she will agree to marry Shantanu only in the condition that her progeny would succeed the throne. But agreeing to such a condition was impossible for Shantanu, as he already had a son Devavrata, the

rightful heir to the throne. Therefore, he returned to the palace in despair and befuddled with grief. Seeing his father in such a state of mind, Devavrata discovers the reason for his sorrow and to end his father's despondency he himself requests Satyavati to marry Shanatanu. He also assures that descendants of Satyavati will only rule over Hastinapur. Thus, she carved a better life for herself by dethroning Devavrata.

Even though Devavrata himself submitted to her conditions, Satyavati wanted her descendants to have a secure future; she was doubtful about Devavrata's stances.  She was aware of the fact that many women entered the royal palace, but it was only the mother whose son became the King would be respected and accorded with power. Therefore, in her pursuit to see her progeny to sit on the throne she made Devavrat take a terrible vow of lifelong celibacy. Devdutt Pattanaik suggests that against the backdrop of the myth shrouding Satyavati's birth, it can be contemplated that her determination to make her own progeny the King of Hatinapur surfaces from her indignation at being disowned by her royal father who accepted his male child but gave her to the fisher community. (2010, 34)

Satyavati again with her sheer intelligence and courage asserts her right as an independent woman and lives her life on her terms with dignity. She does not become a victim of any sexual escapade but rather firmly demands a respectable place. Moreover, after becoming the queen of Hastinapur, she was exposed to new possibilities of personal growth. Her voice in this retelling is not a voice of any weak woman, but a voice of resistance against all the stereotypes of patriarchy. Moreover, she is a representation of the ignored and marginalized communities and her journey from a fisher girl to becoming the queen of Hastinapur is accomplished through sheer intelligence. Kané in her retelling has emphasized Satyavati as a well-educated and intelligent woman. At various points in the narrative she has countered the patriarchal diktats on women— the formidable make ideas on the exclusion of women from any kind of participation and involvement. Kané portrays Satyavati as calm, poised, wise and an astute woman. She moved beyond the confinements of domestic and conjugal duties and took responsibilities of the palace and became a part of the courtly matters. She is a competent administrator, who with Bhisma handled the courtly affairs of her kingdom efficiently. As Kané describes, "She was no silly queen; she was not absurd or foolish; she did not show lack of common sense or judgement. Instead, she was fast proving herself to be an astute woman, without the submissiveness usually associated with being a king's wife". (155)

Satyavati, other than being an efficient administrator is also the voice of weak and deprived communities of Hastinapur. When she became the queen, people of Hastinapur did not accept her at first because of her low born status and secondly due to the conditions she employed to marry Shantanu, but with exceptional intelligence and verbal skills she rightfully gained the status of queen.

Her low caste status was never a hindrance in her journey in accomplishing the ambition of becoming the queen, rather she becomes a spokesperson for the deprived sections of the society. As the queen of Hastinapur, she employed her power strategically towards an inclusion of every class and caste of members of Hastinapur towards a harmonious relationship. Satyavati, when seen through the lens of this revisionism, embodies a strong female agency through which she remoulds not only her life but also that of the underprivileged groups. As Kané puts in,

> The world has got kinder to her now. The people now acknowledged her as Queen Satyavati and not Daseyi, as she had been disparagingly called for so long. She was the Kuru queen, mother of the heirs and champion of the people. It had been a trying task, with the public and nobles both casting aspersions and accusations on her intentions and integrity, but she eventually won them all over. (190)

Kané portrayed Satyavati as a woman who had her own individual identity. She was known as the queen of Hastinapur not just because she married Shantanu but because she exercised her power and position accordingly for a better future of Hastinapur. Geetha V in her book Patriarchy writes that in India women can access the public only as a consort to powerful men and this determines their public power and identity. But in the case of Satyavati, despite becoming a widow, she stepped out of the inner confines and engaged herself in political stagecraft, including administrative decisions and discussions, strategies, and realpolitik. She was politically aware and with Devavrat, she planned and discussed decisions for a brighter Hastinapur. Besides, Satyavati wholeheartedly enjoyed and calmly handled the political space which was generally ruled by men. Her political astuteness was visible in her decisions she took for Hastinapur, like making allies with neighbouring kingdoms by making treaties with powerful rulers, informing them about their threats from other kingdoms, her plans on war, trading, and expansion of Hastinapur. Satyavati unabashedly with her political acumen conveniently ruled the courtly affairs even better than her male counterparts. Moreover, Satyavati wanted to keep the throne of

Hastinapur safe for her sons and she would exercise her power to keep intact everything that she gained. As Kané´ puts in,

> She had to keep her crown and throne safe for her sons. She would not lose all that she had gained. She would not lose her powers to some man, some king. Her biggest fear was that the throne would slip from her hands. She would never lose her own independence and her sovereignty as queen; she swore to herself. She would not allow any man, marriage, or motherhood to erode her power. She had to decide her priorities as she sat on the throne. And she was far too intelligent to compromise herself. (188)

**Satyavati's Bloodline Flourished: Her Progeny the King**

Although, Satyavati guarded the throne for her sons, but destiny played her false when both of her sons died childless and the throne of Hastinapur was in danger. She wanted to place the seed of her clan in the throne and so decided to impregnate her daughters-in-law through the ritual of niyoga. According to the Hindu tradition, niyoga is a ritual of appointing a revered man for helping to bear sons to married women whose husbands have either died childless or are incapable of producing an offspring. Therefore, Satyavati without any inhibitions and reservations about disrespect of her honour invoked her son born through Parasar, the mix-caste Vyasa. She thus ensured that her blood coursed through the veins of the claimants to the throne of Hastinapur. So, as a half-brother to Vichitravirya and Chitrangada, Vyasa was sanctioned to beget children through their widows. Kané´ in this retelling paints Satyavati as the champion of women's rights; for her the ritual of niyoga was not a humiliation for the kingdom. When Devavrat condemned her decision because the ritual started to happen only when sage Parashuram started his deadly vengeance of murder of his father and in this process he killed all the kings and warriors. He destroyed twenty-one generations of them leaving behind no heir for their kingdoms. In the wake of such situation all the widowed queens appealed to men and sages with wisdom to impregnate them and give them a progeny to rule respective kingdoms. He accused Satyavati that her motive for niyoga was just not to have an heir for Hastinapur, but by calling her illegitimate son Vyasa to the rescue, was another

aspiration of her bloodline to flourish. Again, Satyavati offers a divergent dimension to the ritual of niyoga, she says,

> I see it differently. I think the royal women defeated Parashuram's purpose beautifully. By going to rishis and Brahmins, they were still the creators of their progeny, a new race. And through niyog, I am giving the same powers to my daughters-in-law. It is not the men who are important, Dev, it is the women who give birth and create a new life, a new hope, by perpetuating their family line, their dynasty, their clan, their race. Through men claim it to be theirs, in the name of patriarchy. (284)

Satyavati unapologetically bashed the patriarchal notion of a progeny — who is only named after the father. She asserted that society tends to forget the mother who is the actual creator of the heir and rather insisted that women as creator perpetuate their own line of race subverting the accepted belief of men and their heir. This perception of Satyavati counters the patriarchal view of men responsible in creation of a progeny. She broke this stereotype and postulated that women are important because they are the real creators of offspring. She also declared that she was not biased for a male scion only; she will equally accept and empower a female child as the future of Hastinapur. Satyavati in the retelling says, "I want an heir, Dev; be it a girl or a boy. If so destined, a daughter might rule Hastinapur. But there has to be a scion in the family". (284) Therefore, Satyavati's obsession with continuing her own race is a role reversal of the patriarchal system. Moreover, this can also be viewed as resistance to male supremacy as Satyavati exercised her power to ensure that her race continues to rule Hastinapur.

**Conclusion**

This feminist retelling paints Satyavati not as a victim; rather she is happy to lead her life in her terms. Even though she was ignored, she did not allow the situation to overwhelm her. She openly expressed her desires and made clear and straight decisions regarding her body and sexuality. Moreover, without any inhibitions, she aspired for sexual freedom and chose to have a child illegitimately, shunning the societal prejudices labelled on women. Furthermore, she manoeuvred her journey by moving up the societal ladder and became

the queen of Hastinapur. She also demanded the rights of her children to the throne and unwaveringly continued to place the seed of her clan to rule the kingdom.

In the dominant narrative by Vyasa, Satyavati is portrayed as an ambitious, merciless and guileful woman who cunningly becomes the queen. However, in this retelling by Kavita Kané, Satyavati is presented as a bold, intelligent, and practical woman who unapologetically gets whatever she aspires for. She resists stereotypes and bashes the predominant patriarchal values assigned to women. Satyavati is a woman of power, who despite of facing much discrimination, empowers herself, and rises way beyond the shackles of the hegemonic society. Besides, she believed that one's journey is not ruled by any god, fate or destiny but by the choices and decisions one made. She carved out her destiny with the choices that she made and asserted her identity without the help of any powerful facilitator. Satyavati stood out because of her individual abilities and merit. She says,

> God, Fate, Destiny…They are just consoling words, descriptions of man's weakness. Fate can be conquered. You need to have control of your life and decisions first. Blaming everything and everyone for one's mistakes, for one's situation, for one's unhappiness in the name of Fate is escapism. Everything is our responsibility. You have to be your own God, carve out your Destiny, and make your own Fate. If they make us behave as we do, then what about the choices we make? It is our actions that define us, our lives. (267)

Her story defines her as a woman of absolute power. She carves her life in her own manner, choosing to be a mother out of wedlock, though she is forced to desert him, yet she makes sure that Parashar trains him to become a revered sage. Furthermore, when situation arose, she calls for her illegitimate son Vyasa to impregnate her widowed daughters-in-law so that her line of blood continues to rule the throne of Hastinapur. She single-handedly takes responsibility for her actions, decisions, and her blunders, and never plays the victim card for any of her misfortunes. Her journey from Kali, the fisherwoman to Satyavati, the queen is an exceptional one. She can be seen as a feminist because she confidently campaigns for the rights to sexual freedom, rights to her body and choices.  In general sexuality has been regarded as the province of male power and female suppression. Besides, men do not want women to be autonomous beings, making their own decisions and being self-sufficient, which according to them leads to undermining the

control exercised by men. Gerda Lerner asserted that culturally, women are considered as commodities, "women themselves became a resource" (212). Their sexuality is checked, exercised and exchanged according the need of men. But Satyavati in this retelling subverts such controls, rather exercises the sexual freedom for her own gain.

Furthermore, her obsession with her progeny to flourish as the king of Hastinapur can be viewed as a resistance to the normative patriarchal pattern of heirship. Satyavati rather makes an unconventional implication that not men but women are the creators of the progeny and so women are responsible for the continuance of the family. She is the representation of marginalised communities, and despite of hailing from the lower caste makes herself visible within the narrative. She, not only with sheer intellect becomes the queen, but also infiltrates the Kuru dynasty with progeny of mix-race. Satyavati with the help of Vyasa surpassed the constraints of low-caste birth, exhibiting exceptional intelligence, political acumen, and diplomacy becomes the grand matriarch of the Kuru dynasty. She also succeeded in securing the right to the throne of Hastinapur for her descendants.

Satyavati has been an unexplored character from Mahabharata and her perspective had been blurred. However, this retelling places her in the centre of the narrative and brings forth events and outcomes which are the products of her decisions. Pradip Bhattachrya while analysing the character of Satyavati writes, "Modern-day women could well wish that they were half as confident, clear-headed and assertive of their desires and goals as Satyavati" (2006, 24). The journey of Satyavati is a journey of self-realisation where she conquers all the inner insecurities. She as Kali realises her self-worth and does not hide her bodily desires. Moreover, Satyavati asserts her identity which is more than just being restricted to a body. Her 'self' is beyond the patriarchal notions defined by chastity, marriage, motherhood and the restrictive control of men over her life. She defies all the man-made diktats, for her virginity is not a physical condition but purity of thought and action. Satyavati asserted her 'self', transgressing the threshold of patriarchal ideals to become the queen of Hastinapur, transported people from the margin to the centre, and created her own line of progeny to rule the throne. She subverts the social structure, resisting the patriarchal control and retains a place for herself with dignity.

Thus, Satyavati exhibits the ethos of feminism by independently making choices transgressing the confines of the patriarchal definition of gender. She asserts her

individual identity and negotiates a space within the patriarchal culture. In the words of Gerda Lerner, she can be considered as the exponent of 'women's culture',

> "Women live their social existence within the general culture and, whenever they are confined by patriarchal restraint or segregation into separateness (which always has subordination as its purpose); they transform this restraint into complementarity (asserting the importance of woman's function, even its 'superiority') and redefine it. Thus, women live a duality—as members of the general culture and as partakers of women's culture." (qtd. in Showalter 346)

Therefore, by subverting the phallocentric myth, Kané gives an opportunity to Satyavati to share her plight within the grand narrative of Mahabharata. She added a new dimension to the retelling and transposed the character from the margins and liberated them. By liberating the character, Kané empowers her, she who transgresses the confinements of social order to become the grand matriarch of the Kuru dynasty.

# Works Cited

Altekar, A. S. The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1959.

Bandlamudi, Lakshmi. Dialogics of Self, the Mahabharata, and the Culture: The History of Understanding and Understanding of History. London: Anthem Press, 2010.

Bhawalkar, Vanamala. Women in the Mahabharata. Delhi: Sharda publishing house, 1999.

Bhattachrya, Pradip. "Of Kunti and Satyavati: Sexually Assertive Women of the Mahabharta." Manushi. 142 (2006) pdf. www.manushi.india.org. Web accessed on 2 december 2019.

Brodbeck, Simon and Brian Black, eds. Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata. London: Routledge, 2007.

Chakravarti, Uma. "Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm: Towards a New Understanding of Gender Relations in Early Indian History." Women in Early Indian Societies. Ed. Kumkum Roy,New Delhi: Manohar, 1999.

Chow, Rey. Gender and Representation." Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century. Eds. Elizabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka. Columbia UP, 2001.

Geetha, V. Patriarchy: Theorizing Feminism. Calcutta: Stree. 2007.

Kané, Kavita.The Fisher Queen's Dynasty. New Delhi: Westland, 2017.

Kelkar, M.A. Subordination of Woman: A New Perspective. New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House, 1995.

Lerner, G. The Creation of Patriarchy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Lorde, A. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." Zami/Sister Outsider/Undersong. New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1982.

McIntosh, M. (1978). "Who needs prostitutes? The ideology of male sexual needs." Women, Sexuality, and Social Control. Eds. C. Smart & B.Smart, London: Routledge & Kegan Pau. 1978.

Pattanaik, Devdutt. Jaya- An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata. New Delhi: Penguin Books.2010.

Sellers, Susan.Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction. London: Palgrave, 2001.

Shah, Shalini. The Making of Womanhood: Gender Relations in the Mahabharata. New Delhi:  Manohar Publications, 2012.

Shorter, E. A History of Women's Bodies. New York: Basic Books. 1982.

Showalter, Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." Modern Criticism and Theory. David  Lodge, ed. London: Longman, 1991.

**Chapter 7**

# Conclusion

Mythical narratives have always been male dominated and they have portrayed women within the confinement of binary divisions like, 'good'/ 'bad, moral/immoral, 'virtuous'/ 'evil', and so on. As discussed in the chapters that myths are the ideological narratives that control and justify our traditional rituals, beliefs, and social orders. They are the central point for ideological construction of individuals as they construct disparity, power structures and they become the model that strengthens and perpetuate these ideals as normative. Moreover, human communities borrow these ideals and make them instrumental in disseminating them to the upcoming generations. Myths have usually propagated men to exercise their power in order to control women. But myths have eulogised the heroic deeds of men and have failed to attribute women their share of experiences. Because these myths act as a tool in the hands of patriarchy to disperse gender asymmetry in the society and enforce traditional pattern of existence on them.

According to Alicia Ostriker, "it is thanks to myths we believe that women must be either 'angel' or 'monster'" (195, 12). In this type of dichotomy there is not only opposition but, also the presence of a hierarchy where one is always superior to the other and "one term requires the other's absence for its presence" (Korkmaz 2011, 8). Helen Cixous views such division as purely derogatory in terms of defining women. She asserts that male definition of women has, "riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss" (1976, 885). This pattern of dichotomy is visible recurrently in the myths and fiction inspired them, where women are portrayed either as good mothers, responsible wives or wicked monsters and unfaithful whores. Besides, this gender stereotype transpose women to a subordinate role. Therefore, women are depicted as mere victims who need male aid to overcome their distresses. The myths also condemn women who reject to confine themselves to the role of subservient, and ironically, they are labelled as immoral, corrupt, and vile.

However, in this dissertation, it is found that Kavita Kané with the technique of Revisionist Mythmaking has challenged and blurred this dichotomous attribute given to women characters from myths. She has explicated on the marginalised characters like Surpanakha, Menaka, Satyavati, Urmila, and Ahalya in order to give them voice to narrate

their experiences in the epic narratives. Her characters are not timid or passive but are strong and bold and have full autonomy of their lives.

The technique of Revisionist Mythmaking is an effective tool to subvert the dominant male linguistic medium and rectify the constructed image of women. This technique deconstructs the traditional narratives that imprison women in a subordinate position. Besides these epic narratives were created by men and hence, perpetuated a male hegemony in the society. But with this technique, myths are re-written, re-told, re-interpreted, re-furbished, and re-woven to promote an alternative perspective by bringing women to the centre of the narrative. It gives voice to the devoiced women characters from the epics and re-imagines them and their deeds. The characters dealt with in this thesis are mostly side-lined from the mainstream narrative, as their voices are silenced, like that of Surpanakha, the fallen woman, who was forcibly mutilated for transgressing the borders of sexuality, or the unheard voice of Urmila who hardly gets any space within the vast plot of the *Ramayana*, or the misstated Satyavati, who is portrayed as cunning, greedy and ambitious, or censored Menaka, who is labelled as the seductress. Kavita Kané has presented them as empowered figures with agency. She is one of the important feminist writers who incorporate feminism into mythology. In an interview with the Indian Express, she says, "I always believed that mythology can be a huge canvas for contemporary thought. It is not telling us some old tales, as so carelessly assumed, of Gods and Goddesses, but of Man and his follies and fallacies" (Kaushik). Kané through her retelling exposed the readers to the patriarchal oppression present in the mythologies and offers an alternative identity to women as strong and determined. She counters the misogyny perpetuated by the mythologies and re-writes them to break the stereotypes against women characters. As she says,

> If women have not been portrayed in a proper light, it's because of misogyny and chauvinism which made us all myopic and did not allow us to see these women for their enormous strength and conviction. We need to return them into their original self by again using mythology as a tool to show what they originally were. (Kaushik)

Strong feminist characters were always present in mythology, but the dominant narratives have moulded the vision of people in a society. For example, this verse on the strong five maidens,

*Ahalya Draupadi Kunti Tara Mandodari tatha / Panchakanya smaranityam mahapataka nashaka*

This verse when translated means, whoever remembers these five great women, Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, and Mandodari – will be rescued from any forms of sin and failure. This group of 'saviour' women is indeed a prototype of strong women, who counter the patriarchal incarcerations, but the status of ideal woman has always gone to Sita, who submissively accepts the whims of her husband. On the contrary, Ahalya, Kunti, or Draupadi were better portrayed as warnings to what one should not be. The stigma of illegitimate children, public disrobing, or being turned into stone could be the result of an untamed desire for independence. Though there are hundreds of retellings and reinterpretations through the centuries in which female protagonists have been re-cast in a new light, these stories have largely remained confined to their pigeonhole, and in terms of their popularity among the common mass, they have been offered a minimal scope for reference. (Bhattcharya, 2004)

Likewise, Kané through her characters has made an effort to bring forth overlooked characters, moving beyond the known characters like Sita and Draupadi. She is the voice of the minor characters that are hardly considered to have an existence. Moreover, Kané's retellings offer these characters a magnanimous space to share their experiences and explicate their characters in detail to demonstrate their importance in development of the plot of both the epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahbharata*. Kané brings into light the character of Urmila, who is generally known as the wife of Lakshman but hardly anyone knows that she also the sister of Sita. Again, when it comes to the character of Satyavati, it is hardly get noticed that Satyavati from being a mere fisherwoman rose to become the grand matriarch of Hastinapur. When it comes to the character Menaka, she is only considered as the ultimate seductress who induced sexual passions in the great Vishwamitra to break his vows of austerity. But when seen through the eyes of Menaka, she as a character is rendered voiceless. As Kané ponders in an interview with Outlook India, "We are familiar with the erotic Menaka-Vishwamitra episode. We often see both as caricatures: he the irascible rishi and she as the beauteous *apsara*. But what else?" (Aggarwal).

Surpanakha, the monster, the hideous 'other' is invariably characterised as the loose, unchaste, and bad woman. But she acted as an agency in accelerating the plot of

*Ramayana* because without the episode of mutilation, the war of *Ramayana* never would have happened. Surpanakha was punished for expressing her repressed sexuality which was considered dangerous for any woman to yearn for.

The women writers of the post-independence period wrote about female experiences and their plots dive deep into the female psyche. Their writing addresses various issues on loneliness, desires, resistance, ambition, marriage, separation, freedom, and identity from a female perspective. Besides, writers like, Kamala Das, Shashi Depande, Mahashweta Devi, Anita Desai, Ruth Jhabvala, Manju Kapur, Sobha De and Rupa Bajwa broke the stereotypical representation of women as passive, cold, timid, and voiceless but instead showed them in different light. These writers made women their subjects and gave voice to their muted feminine sensibilities. All their works are a quest for a discovery of their 'self' and their identities. The characters of their works are called the 'new woman'. The term 'new woman' was first used by the Irish writers Sarah Grand in the year 1894 to refer women who are independent and revolutionary. As Sally Ledger defines,

The 'wild woman', the 'glorified spinster', the 'advanced woman', the 'odd woman'; the 'modern woman', 'Novissima', the 'shrieking sisterhood', the 'revolting daughter' - all these discursive constructs variously approximated to the nascent 'New Woman'. (1997, 3)

In the Indian context Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Sobha De and others have depicted women not as silent sufferers, but as spirited and determined individuals who know how to fight against injustice and humiliation. The female protagonists of these Indian writers had to face many vicissitudes of family-life, but they keep abreast of all the hurdles that come their way in their arduous quest for their own identities in a highly patriarchal society. They fight for emancipation and empowerment. In Indian society, the term 'new woman' signifies the awakening of women into a realisation of their appropriate place in the family and society. Conscious of individuality, the new Indian woman asserts her rights as having a status equal to that of a man in the society. They struggle to be independent, breaking the old shackles of submission and mute-sufferings. Anita Desai's protagonists also portray similar attributes of self-assertion within the existing patriarchal setup. Maya from *Cry, The Peacock* (1963), had an irresistible desire for self-assertion and emancipation to acquire autonomy in the patriarchal setup of her family. Monisha from *Voices in the City* (1965), was conscious of her identity and silently defied the traditional values to seek meaning in life.

Sita from *Where Shall We Go This Summer (1975),* was entrapped within the confinement of patriarchal regulations, and to defy those, she takes recourse to a secluded life in the Manori Island. Similarly, in the recent past, there has emerged a generation of writers other than Kavita Kané, who have also successfully been able to reinvent the age-old mythological stories in a form that appeals to the sensibilities of the modern English speaking reader. Authors like Ashok K. Banker, Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik , Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Samhita Arni, Irawati Karve, Amruta Patil, Ahweta Taneja, Namita Gokhale, Saraswati Rajpal, Ira Mukoty, Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan, Anuja Chandramouli, Popuri Lalita Kumari, Mahashweta Devi, Saraswati Nagpal, Kartika Nair, and Madhavi Mahadevan have been retelling the mythic narratives in their own ingenious ways and have achieved striking success in capturing the imagination of the present tech-savvy generation. The popularity and commercial success of their works is unprecedented in the Indian publishing history of fiction in English. This reinventing or rewriting the mythological stories to suite the post-globalized milieu is a key for the success of these writings. This category consciously addresses the strong aspiring Indian middle-class sections that are desperately looking for the 'modern' role-models within the glorious past. Their writings examine the social, political, and cultural realities of India and present women from mythologies who can be the inspiration to the twenty-first-century women of India.

In India, mythologies and the stories associated with them have added to the cultural vibrancy of the country; they have been so ingrained into the everyday existence of the people that it has now become impossible to take them out of our lives. Therefore, the gender asymmetries portrayed in the mythologies are also considered normal. *Ramayana* is considered the standard model of morality which has been documented through women, where women are assigned to polarities like good and bad, pure, and impure, auspicious and inauspicious, by men. The idea of Sita like women is still considered the ideal whereas women who are bold, free, and unapologetic are considered to be immoral like Surpanakha. In the recent times, when violent crimes against women in the country have been at an all-time high, various influential people have been seen improperly referencing the major Hindu epics to promote a secondary and submissive status for modern Indian women. One of such comments is:

> There is only one phrase for this and that is 'moral limit'; there is a lakshman
> rekha (Lakṣhmaṇa's line) for every person, when it's crossed then the demon king

> Raavan will abduct Goddess Sita…One has to abide by certain moral limits. If you cross this limit you deserve to be punished. Just like Sita was abducted by Ravana". (qtd. from Brown and Agarwal 6)

This statement suggests that universally women should confine themselves to the patriarchal boundaries, but transgression of these boundaries will result in punishments by men. This comment makes very clear that women are suggested to emulate the subservient Sita as their role model and should learn a lesson from her abduction. Partha Chaterjee in *Nation and Its Fragments* (1993) opines that the concepts of nationalism, including Indian nationalism are inherently patriarchal in nature from its very beginning. They glorified the men while providing women secondary positions. Women were symbolic of spirituality in a domestic and national level. Women were supposed to venerated, cherished, and protected and were considered incapable of voicing their own concerns. Even their voice was limited to the domestic and familial levels only. During the nation building exercise, the next generation of Indian women was supposed to be different from traditional Indian women, who were illiterate and invisible. However, they were also not supposed to be like their western counterparts who were believed to be wilful, disagreeable, and overall immoral. The Indian woman was supposed to be educated just enough so that she could rear her sons properly for the nation. She was the symbol of spirituality in a domestic level as well its guardian and was supposed to stay far away from the nation building endeavour (Chatterjee 127-134). The nationalists to support their views of the Indian women gradually took instances from mythological and historical epics to construct and support their ideals on the role of native women in the new democracy.

But with the alternative narratives, folk songs, and retellings, from time to time people have articulated the subservient, and critiqued the perpetrators and their code of morality.

This works portrayed the inner psyche of women and their insecurities. And these women promptly voiced their inner self and asserted their identity within the patriarchal structures

Kavita Kané, similarly heralded a divergent wave to communicate with women through her women-centric retellings. She recreated her characters in tune with the rising new Indian woman. The women are portrayed to be powerful, hungry, sensuous, and ambitious. They use their sexuality as weapon with which they could re-construct the opinion of men and subsequently surpass them. Such a representation of a woman directly

challenges the conventional image of a family and society. It even shakes the foundation of concepts such as marriage and motherhood to their core. They openly engage in pre-marital sex and extramarital relationships and break the taboo associated with them. The "New Woman" fights for her own self to escape the grip of patriarchy.

Women of these works are often subjected to physical and mental torture and sometimes they are even victims of physical mutilation under the yoke of a patriarchal society. They are discriminated against because they are considered to be the weaker sex with little to no power of their own. However, these heroines consistently attempt to break these societal shackles to assert their own identity.These heroines struggle for their ambitions and life goals against the men who had oppressed them and suppressed their desires. In their quest for their identity, they often shatter the patriarchal cask that was supposed to contain them.

This thesis thus has explored the stories of devoiced women characters from Hindu mythology re-written by Kavita Kané in her retellings. These women as portrayed by Kané have smashed the ideologies propagated in the traditional 'man-made' narratives and have subverted the texts and placed themselves in the centre of the plot. They have crossed the borders of perceived femininity as constructed by men, they have questioned the norms of society that suppressed women, they have struggled and denounced the oppression put on them, they were opinionated about their desires, wishes and ambition, they have broken all the societal stereotypes against women and have asserted their identity.

**Scope for Further Research**

Further research could be understaken to explore the identity of other women characters from Hindu myths and lengends. This thesis has concentrated on the retellings by Kavita Kané, for further analysis, retellings by other recent authors and writers, both male and female, could be considered to highlight the diverse naratives of unsung men and women characters based on Indian myths.

## Bibliography

Abrams, M.H. A Glossary of Literary Terms. 7th edition. India: Harcourt Asia Ptv Ltd., 2000.

Aguiar, Sarah Appleton. *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001.

Alexander, Flora. *Contemporary Women Novelists*. Great Britain: Edward Arnold, 1989.

Allen, M. R. *Women in India and Nepal*. Vol. 8. Australian National University Monograph on South Asia, 1988.

Allen, Michael R. *Women in India and Nepal*. Vol. 8, Australian National University Monograph on South Asia, 1982.

Altekar, A. S. *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1959.

Altekar, A. S. *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day*. 2nd ed. 1959. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 2005.

Anderson, Linda. "At the Threshold of the Self: Women and Autobiography". *Women's Writing: A Challenge to Theory.* Ed. Moira Monteith. Great Britain: The Harvester Press, 1986.

Ashcroft, Bill. *Post-Colonial Studies*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Ausband, Stephen C. *Myth and Meaning, Myth and Order*. U.S.A.: Mercer University Press, 1983.

Badrinath, Chaturvedi. *The Women of the Mahabharata: The Question of Truth*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2008.

Balarama, Gunvanthi. "Casting Aspersions: Ambedkar's Riddle." *Bombay*, 22 Dec. 1988, pp. 27–32.

Bandlamudi, Lakshmi. *Dialogics of Self, the Mahabharata, and the Culture: The History of Understanding and Understanding of History*. London: Anthem Press, 2010.

Barecca, Regina. *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humor in British Literature*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. London: Paladin, 1972.

Bartkowski, Frances. *The Feminist Utopias*. Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991.

Beauvoir, Simon de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley. London: Vintage1997.

Bhattacharya, Ashim Kumar. *Hindu Dharma: Introduction to Scriptures and Theology*. Lincoln: iUniverse, 2006.

Bhattacharya, Birendra Kumar. "The Mahabharata- An Epic of Santarasa" *The Mahabharata Revisited*. R.N. Dandekar, Ed. New Delhi: Sahïtya Akademi .1990.

Bhattacharya, Pradip. *Panch-Kanya: The Five Virgins of Indian Epics*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 2005.

Bhattachrya, Pradip. "Of Kunti and Satyavati: Sexually Assertive Women of the Mahabharata." *Manushi*. 142 (2006). [www.manushi.india.org](www.manushi.india.org). Web accessed on 2 december 2019.

Bhawalkar, Vanamala. Woman in the Mahābhārata. Delhi: Sharada Publishing

Birch, David. *Language, Literature, and Critical Practice*. London: Routledge, 1989.

Bittner, James W. *Approaches to the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1984.

Bloom, Harold. Ed. *The Chelsea House Library of Literary Criticism: Twentieth-Century American Literature*. Vol. 6. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.

BN.K. & Sinha, S.N. *History of Prostitution in India*. New Delhi: Cosmo
      Publications, 1994.

Boyer, Regis. "Virile women". *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and
      Archetypes*. Ed.. Pierce Brunel. London. Routledge, 1992.

Bravo, Nicole Fernandez. "Doubles and Counterparts". *Companion to Literary
      Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*. Ed. Pierce Brunel. London: Routledge,
      1992.

Brodbeck, Simon and Brian Black, eds. *Gender and Narrative in the
      Mahabharata*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Brodzki, Bella. "Mothers, Displacement, and Language". *Women,
      Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson.
      U.S.A.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

Brown, Sarah Annes. "Hail, Muse! Et Cetera: Greek Myth in English and
      American   Literature". *The Cambridge Companion to Greek
      Mythology*. Ed. Roger D. Woodard. New York: Cambridge University
      Press, 2007.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New
      York: Routledge, 1999.

Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.
      London: Routledge, 1990.

Case, Sue Ellen. *Feminism and Theatre*. U.S.: Routledge, 1988.

Cassirer, Ernst. *Language and Myth*. Trans. Susanne K. Langer. New York:
      Dover        Publications Inc., 1953.

Cavallaro, David. *French Feminist Theory: An Introduction*. London:
      Continuum, 2003.

Chakravarti, U. "Conceptualising Brahminical Patriarchy in Early India:
      Gender, Caste, Class and State". Economic Political Weekly, 28(14),
      1933

---, "Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm: Towards a New Understanding of Gender Relations in Early Indian History." *Women in Early Indian Societies*. Ed. Kumkum Roy, New Delhi: Manohar, 1999.

Chow, Rey. "Gender and Representation." *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*. Eds. Elizabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka. Columbia UP, 2001.

Cixous, Helene. *Feminisms – An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robin R.Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

Cohen, Jeffrey. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996.

Coupe, Laurence. *Myth*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Cowart, David. "Attenuated Postmodernism: Pynchon's Vineland." *Critique* 32.2(1990):72.

Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973

--. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. London: The Women's Press, 1978

Derné Steve. *Culture in Action: Family Life, Emotion, and Male Dominance in Banaras, India*. State University of New York Press, 1995.

Deshpande, Shashi. *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Viking-Penguin, 2003.

Dhand, Arti. "Poison, Snake, the Sharp Edge of a Razor: Yet the Highest of Gurus. Defining Female Sexuality in the *Mahabharata*". PhD. Dissertation. Montreal: McGraw Hill University, 2000.

Dhand, Arti. "Women, Smelly Ascetics, and Reproductive Method: Reflections on a Theme in the Mahabharata." Paper Presented at the AAR San Francisco. March (1999), pp.1-40.

Dörschel, Funda Basak. *"Female Identity": Rewritings of Greek and Biblical Myths by Contemporary Women Writers* (dissertation). Middle East Technical University, 2011.

Dowden, Ken. *The Uses of Greek Mythology*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Dutta, Ujjal. "Women in Bengali Fiction— An Enquiry." *Women in Fiction and Fiction by Women*. Eds. C. D. Narasimhaiah et. Al. Mysore: Dhvanyaloka, 1986.

Eagleton,Terry. "Literary Theory: An Introduction". *Feminist Literary Theory. A Reader*. Ed. Mary Eagleton. USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1986.

Eliade, Mircea. *Myth and Reality*. Trans.Willard R Trask. New York: Harper and Row, 1963.

Erndl, M. K., "The Mutilation of Surpanakha". *In: Many Rāmāyanas: the Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. Eds. P. Richman. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Fairclough, Norman. Language and Power. New York: Longman Inc., 1989.

Frye, Northrop. The Great Code: The Bible and Literature. U.S.A.: Harcourt, Inc., 1983.

Frye, Northrop. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. U.S.A.: Harcourt, Inc., 1983.

Furman, Nelly. "The Politics of Language: Beyond the Gender Principle". *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*. Eds. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn. London: Routledge, 1991.

Gamble, Sarah. Ed. *The Fiction of Angela Carter*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

Gelpi, B. C., & Gelpi, A. *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose: Poems, Prose, Reviews, and Criticism*: New York: WW Norton, 1993.

Geetha, V. *Patriarchy: Theorizing Feminism*. Calcutta: Stree. 2007.

Gettel, R.C., and Dunning, W.A. Eds. *Feminism. An Essential Reading. New Delhi*: Cosmo Publications, 2004.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Gubar, Susan. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984.

Glover, David and Kaplan, Cora. *Genders.* London: Routledge, 2000.

Gould, Eric. *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

Greene, Gayle. *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition*. USA: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Greene, Gayleand Kahn, Coppelia. "Feminist Scholarship and the social construction of woman". *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*. Eds. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn. London: Routledge, 1991.

Grimes, J. "Feminism and the Indian Goddess: Different Models", *Ethical and Political Dilemmas of Modern India*, Eds. Smart, N. and Thakur, S., London: Macmillan, 1993.

Gross, R. "Hindu Female Deities as a Resource for the Contemporary Rediscovery of the Goddess", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46 (September 1978), 3, pp. 269-92.

Grosz, Elizabeth. Jacques Lacan. *A Feminist Introduction*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Gubar, Susan. "Mother Maiden and the Marriage of Death: Women Writers and an Ancient Myth." *Women Studies* 6.3, 1979.

Guerin Wilfred L., et al. Eds. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature.*5th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Guerin, Wilfred L. et al. A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.

Guerin, Wilfred L. et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. 3rd Ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.

Gullette, Alan. "Myth, Language, Thought and Reality: An Extension of the Whorfian Hypothesis". University of Tennessee-Knoxville: English 3330: *Linguistics*  (December 5, 1975).  Web.20 May. 2009.

Gunton, Sharon R. et al., Eds. Contemporary Literary Criticism.Vol.22. USA: Gale Research Company, 1982.

Haase, Donald. *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*. U.S.A: Wayne State University Press, 2004.

Harlan, L., Courtright, and P. B., *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion and Culture.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Harries, Elizabeth Wanning. T*wice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/ Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. U.S.A.: Indiana University Press, 1989.

Humm, Maggie. *Feminist Criticism: Women as Contemporary Critics*. Great Britain: The Harvester Press, 1986.

Iyengar, K R.S, editor. *Asian Variations in Ramayana*. Sahitya Akademi, 1983.

J, Gonda. "Ascetics and Courtesans". *Selected Studies*, Vol. 4. (1975), pp.223-225.

Jain, Jasbir. *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency* New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2011.

Jones, Ann Rosalind. "Inscribing Femininity: French Theories of the Feminine". *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*. Eds. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn. London: Routledge, 1991.

Jones, Ann Rosalind. "Inscribing Femininity: French Theories of the Feminine". *Making A Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*. Eds. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn. London: Routledge, 1991.80-112.

Kakar, Sudhir and Katharina Kakar. *The Indians: Portrait of a People*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2007.

Kane, Kavita. *Sita's Sister*. New Delhi: Rupa Publication2014.

---, Menaka's Choice, New Delhi: Rupa Publication., 2016.

*---, Lanka's Princess*. New Delhi: Rupa, 2017

---, *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*. New Delhi: Westland, 2017.

Kaplan, Cora. Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism. London: Verso, 1986.

Kaplan, Cora. *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism*. London: Verso, 1986.

Kelkar, M.A. *Subordination of Woman: A New Perspective*. New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House, 1995.

Kishwar, Madhu. "Yes to Sita, No to Ram: The Continuing Popularity of Sita in India." *Manushi 98*, 1997.

Klages, Mary. "Claude Levi Strauss: The Structural Study of Myth". *Literary Theory: A   Guide for the Perplexed*. New Yor**k:** Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, 2006.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New London: Routledge, 2006.

LaL, P. "Myth and the Indian Writer in English: A Note". *Aspects of Indian Writing in English*. Ed. M.K, Naik, Madras: Macmillan India. 1979.

L, Gouri P. "Mahabharata: A Mythology in the Making (I)", *Bulletin of Deccan College     Research Institute*, Vol.44. (1985), pp.83-93.

Lerner, G. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Leslie, Julia and Mary Mc Gee eds. *Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics in India.* New Delhi: OUP, 2001.

Levin, Harry. "Some Meanings of Myth". *Myth and Mythmaking*. Ed. Henry A. Murray. Boston. Beacon Press, 1960. 103-114.

Long, Judy. *Telling Women's Lives: Subject/Narrator/Reader/Text*. NYU Press, 1999. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg2kw.

Lorde, A. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." *Zami/Sister Outsider/Undersong*. New York:  Quality Paperback Book Club, 1982.

Marowski, Daniel. Ed. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol.36. USA: Yale Research Company, 1986.

Marshall, John. *Mohenjodaro and the Indus civilization*, London: Arthur Probsthian, 1931.

McGrath, Kevin. *Strī: Feminine Power in the Mahābhārata*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011.

McIntosh, M. (1978). "Who needs prostitutes? The ideology of male sexual needs." *Women, Sexuality, and Social Control*. Eds. C. Smart & B. Smart, London: Routledge & Kegan Pau. 1978.

Menon, Nivedita. *Seeing Like a Feminist*. New Delhi: Zubaan and Penguin Books, 2012.

Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. New York: Doubleday, 1970

Mills, Sara, et al. *Feminist Readings Feminist Reading*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989.

Mitter, Sara S. *Dharma's Daughters: Contemporary Indian Women and Hind Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Ann Russo, Lourdes Torres, eds. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Indiana UP, 1991.

Mori, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London: Methuen, 1985.

Moriarty, Michael. *Roland Barthes*. California: Stanford University Press, 1991.

Mukhopadhyay, Arpita. *Feminisms*. Ed. Sumit Chakrabarti. Hyderabad: Orient
Blackswan Pvt. Limited, 2016.

New York: Routledge, 1993.

Olivelle, Patrick *The Law Code of Manu*. New York: OUP. 2004.

Olivelle, Patrick, ed. and trans. *Dharmasūtra Parallels*. New Delhi: Motilal
Banarasidass, 2005.

Oppert, G. *The original Inhabitants of India or Bharatvarsha*, London:
Westminster, 1893.

Ostriker, Alicia. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in
America*.

Ostriker, Alicia. "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist
Mythmaking". *Signs* 8.1 (Autumn, 1982): 68-90. JSTOR. Web. 15 Dec
2013.

Padia, Chandrakala. "Introduction." *Feminism, Tradition and Modernity*. IIAS,
2002, pp 1-24.

Pandit, S, P. *Atharvaveda*. ed., Krishnadas Academy, 1989.

Parker, Lyn. "Conclusion." *The Agency of Women in Asia*. Marshall
Cavendish, 2005.

Pattanaik, Devdutt. *The Goddess in India: The Five Faces of the Eternal
Feminine*. Inner Traditions International, 2000.

---, *Jaya- An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*. New Delhi: Penguin
Books.2010.

---,*Sita -An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*. Gurgaon: Penguin    Books,
2013.

Pollock, Sheldon. "The Ramayaṇa of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India,
Volume III: Aranyakāṇḍa." Eds. Robert P, Goldman Princeton
University Press. *JSTOR*, 1991, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bmzkf0.

Pratt, Annis. *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*. USA: Indiana University
Press, 1981.

Pykett, L. The "Improper" *Feminine: the Women's Sensation Novel and the
New Woman Writing*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Rao, V. N. "The Song of Urmila's Separation: Andhra Women's Song
Spotlights Ramayana's Neglected Urmila." *Manushi*, issue no.153,
2006, pp. 14-21.

Reddy, Snehalata. "Sita." *The Other Side*, Sept. 1985, pp. 32–41.

Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *College
English* vol. 34, no.1, 1972, pp. 18-30. JSTOR. Accessed 14 Sept. 2019.

Richman, Paula. *Many Rāmāyanas: the Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in
South Asia*. Oxford University Press, 1992.

---, *Ramayana Stories: In Modern South India An Anthology*. Indiana: UP,
2008.

Righter, Wiliam. *Myth and Literature*. London-Boston: Routledge & Kegan
Paul, 1975.

Rochelle, Warren G. *Communities of the Heart: The Rhetoric of myth in the
fiction of    Ursula K. Le Guin*. Liverpool, England: Liverpool
University Press, 2001.

Russ, Joanna. *How to Suppress Women's Writing*. Austin, University of Texas
Press, 1983.

Sahgal Nayantara, *Point of View*, New Delhi: Prestige, 1997

Schorer, Mark. "The Necessity of Myth". *Myth and Mythmaking*. Ed. Henry A.
Murray.    New York: Beacon Press, 1960.

Sellers, Susan. *Language and Sexual Difference: Feminist Writing in France*.
London:    Macmillan Education Ltd, 1991.

---, *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. London: Palgrave,
2001.

Sen, Nabaneeta Dev. "Rewriting the Ramayana: Chandrabati and Molla." *Crossing Boundaries IIC (Monsoon)*, vol. 24, no. 2/3, 1997, pp. 163–177.

Sen, Nabaneeta Dev. "When Women Retell the Ramayana." *Manushi 108*, 10 Dec. 2016.

Sengupta, Polie. *Women Centre Stage: The Dramatist and the Play*. Routledge, 2016.

Shah, Shalini. *The Making of Womanhood: Gender Relations in the Mahabharata*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2012.

Sharma, K. S. "Redefining Self: Women in Postcolonial Indian English Literature: An Indian Approach". E.d. M. Agarwal. *Women in Postcolonial Indian English Literature: Redefining Self*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2011.

Sheth, Surabhi D. "Woman's Sexuality: A Portrayal from Ancient Indian Literature" *Manushi* Special Issue: *Indian Cultures and Faith Traditions*. New Delhi: Manushi Trust, (July-August 1992), pp. 14-17.

Shorter, E. *A History of Women's Bodies*. New York: Basic Books. 1982.

Showalter, Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." *Modern Criticism and Theory.* David Lodge, ed. London: Longman, 1991.

Shreekala, K S. "A New Sita." *Manushi 108 4/1*, 1983.

Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Parshley. London: Picador Classics, 1953.

Sjoo, Monica and Barbara More. *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of The Earth*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987.

Spender, Dale. *Man Made Language.* London: Routledge, 1980.

Sruti's Book Blog: Author interview: Kavita Kané. Author of Sita's Sister. Web. 13 July 2015

Sunder Rajan, R., *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, Postcolonialism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

T. Vijay Kumar, Volga, C. Vijayashree. Libertion of Sita. New Delhi: Harper
Collins India, 2018.

Thapan, M. *Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity*. New Delhi: Oxford
University  Press, 1998.

*The New Encyclopedia Britannica Macropedia*. U.S.A. Encyclopedia
Britannica Inc.,    Vol.10 and 12, 1978.

University Press, 2004.

Ussher, Jane. *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive
Body*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Valmiki, and Hari Prasad Shastri. *The Ramayana of Valmiki*. Shanti Sadan,
1952.

Viswamohan, Ayesha. "Urmila: Existential Dilemma and Feminist Concerns."
*Indian Literature*, vol. 45, no. 6 (206), 2001, pp. 184–189. JSTOR,

Watts, Alan W. *Myth and Ritual in Christianity*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.

Young, Serenity, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion*. Vol 1.

**Curriculum Vita**
Aditi Dirghangi
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Dept. of Humanities & Social Sciences
National Institute of Technology
Rourkela, Odisha.
Email: aditidirghangi@gmail.com
Mob No.: +91 8908023248

**THESIS:**

"Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking: Analysing Kavita Kané Retellings" (Status: thesis submitted.)

**AREAS OF INTEREST:**

- Research Interest: Feminist Literature, English in India, Cultural Studies, Mythology, Revisionist Mythmaking.
- Teaching Interest: Language and Writing, Critical Thinking, Business English, Communication Skills, Soft Skills.

**PUBLICATIONS:**

- Dirghangi, Aditi and Seemita Mohanty. "Gods Riding Vimana: Mythology as a Metaphor of Science". *Breaking New Grounds: Perspectives on Recent Indian English Fiction (Collection of Essays)*, New Delhi: Routledge Publishing House, 2019 (Accepted)
- Dirghang, Aditi. "Fantasy". *Springer Encyclopaedia of Psychology and Religion*, 2019. (Published)  DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-27771-9_200054-1
- Dirghangi, Aditi and Seemita Mohanty. "A Feminist Approach to *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*: Characters on Periphery". *Book chapter in an unpublished book*. (Under Review).

- Dirghangi, A and S. Mohanty. (2020). De-mythifying the Ramayana: A Study of the 'Devoiced' Surpanakha. *Proceeding of the International Conference on Arts and Humanities*, *6*(1), 8-15. https://doi.org/10.17501/23572744.2019.6102 (Indexed by Crossref)

- Dirghangi Aditi and Seemita Mohanty. "Women on Trial: Revisiting the Stories of Ramayana's Sita and Surpanakha". *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*. (communicated)

**EXPERIENCE**

- Research Associate in the project, 'Identity and Politics in the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*: A Tribal Perspective', funded by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt. of India, Centre of Excellence for Tribal Studies, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology Rourkela, Odisha (2017-2019).

**CONFERENCES AND WORKSHOPS ATTENDED**:

- Presented Paper on ""Sssztt!" Representation of sacred figures in Contemporary Indian Popular Print" at the 5th Researcher's At Work Conference from 9-11 September 2015, organised by the department of Comparative Literature, University of Hyderabad.
- Presented Paper on "Historicizing the Myth: Alternative History in the 'Neo-Mythological Fiction'" at the 16th International Conference on 'Fact, Distortions and Erasures: Literature as History; History in Literature' organised by the MELOW: The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the World from 3-5 March 2017 in Chandigarh.
- Participated and presented paper on "Telling as Refashioning: Reading New-Indian Mythology " at the VII Lisbon Summer School for the Study of Culture on 'Global Translations' organised by The Lisbon Consortium, Catholic University of Portugal from June 26 to July 1, 2017 in Lisbon.
- Attended a GIAN workshop on Indian Folk Epics- A South Indian Perspective organised by the Ambedkar University, Delhi from 2nd November to 8th November, 2017.
- Presented Paper on "De-mythifying the Ramayana: A Study of the 'Devoiced' Surpanakha" at the 5 th International Conference on Arts and Humanities – ICOAH 2018 "Arts and Humanities as Visionary Practices in a Changing World" organized by The International Institute of Knowledge Management (TIIKM), Sri Lanka in collaboration with Concordia University, Canada as the Hosting Partner. Faculty of Fine Arts, Ankara University – Turkey and University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Sri Lanka were the Academic Partners of the Conference while Sri Lanka Convention Bureau was the successful strategic partner of the Conference.

**ACHIEVEMENTS**

- Awarded Best poster in department "Gods Controlling Remote- Control Drones: Mythology as a Metaphor of Science" in the RESEARCH SCHOLARS' WEEK-2018 held at National Institute of Technology Rourkela on April 21 & 22, 2018.

**ACADEMIC QUALIFICATION**

- Ph.D. (Thesis: Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking: Analysing Kavita Kané's Novels) in the Dept. of Humanities and Social Sciences, NIT, Rourkela.
- M.A. in English, 75.2%, English and Foreign Languages University, Lucknow Campus, 2014
- B.A. English (Hons.), 65.2 %, English and Foreign Languages University, Lucknow campus. 2012
- CBSE, AISSCE 65.6%, Burnpur Riverside School, West Bengal, 2009.
- CBSE, AISSE 77.2%, Burnpur Riverside School, West Bengal, 2007.

**PROFILE**:

NATIONALITY: Indian

DATE OF BIRTHDAY: 16 September, 1990

FATHER'S NAME: Durga Sankar Dirghangi

LANGUAGES KNOWN: English, Hindi, and Bengali.

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that all the above information is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Signature:

*Aditi Dirghangi*

Place: *Rourkela*