

## **Subverting Androcentrism and Voicing the Silenced in Kavita Kane's *The Lanka's Princess***

"What cannot be said above all must not be silenced but written"

- Jacques Derrida

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### **Abstract**

The retecast of Ramayana is presumed to have garnered the record as one of the most viewed television series with about 7.7 million viewers worldwide. Mythologies in India are closely intertwined with the socio-cultural aspects of the people, dictating the way the society functions. Such a massive reception of the myths after years of their origin only reiterates the significance and influence of mythologies even today. The retelling of mythologies is not a current phenomenon, as evident in the presence of the different versions of Ramayana and Mahabharata. From films, dramas to television series, the two narratives have provided the blueprint for artists from all fields to explore and re-imagine them. The most significant change, however, occurred in recent times with the emergence of the often marginalized section revisiting the two grand narratives, the most prominent being Feminists and Dalits, and give space to the often marginalized characters that are assigned the role of the 'other.' Writing and Reading are often considered political. The meaning-making process and what is being told or what is omitted is governed by the hegemonic control of the one in power. Mythology is typically considered as the avenue for Men. Women represented in the epics hardly play a significant role. The omission of the voice of the women like Supernekha, Draupadi, Mandodari, Sita, Urmilla from the grand narratives becomes all the more vivid as they represent the voice of the sidelined or marginalized. The right to form history belongs to the one ruling. In this case, it is the patriarchal setup that allows only for the androcentric viewpoint in the process relegating all the other possible views. In this vein, using an overarching lens of Feminism, the paper attempts to see Kavita Kane's *The Lanka's Princess*, from the viewpoint of the often voiceless characters to dismantle the binary structure and subvert Androcentrism.

**Keywords-** Androcentrism, Marginalized, Mythology, Patriarchy, Revisioning

The word 'myth' comes from the Greek word 'Mythos,' which means an idea or assumption. In Sanskrit, 'mythos' is called 'Mithya.' 'Mythos' or 'Mithya' stands in contrast to 'logos' or

'Satya,' which stands for reason and logic over abstract ideas. It represents the constant tussle between reason and faith. Mythology and Myth have a reciprocal connection as defined by Devdutt Patnaik in *Myth= Mithya*, "If Myth is an idea, mythology is the vehicle of that idea. Mythology constitutes stories, symbols, and rituals that make a myth tangible" (Pattanaik). Myth is considered an abstract idea, and Mythology the medium through which the Myth takes shape through stories, symbols, and rituals. The Ramayana and Mahabharata are few such manufacturers of myths that govern and shape the perspective and conduct of a particular community. The concept of Good vs. Evil, fallen women, ideal men and women, men as protectors are some of the many myths that exist even today. Myth as a socially constructed idea possesses the possibility of creating unity or enlarge the divide that already exists in a society. Myths function on the principles of Binary opposition put forth by the Structuralist. Helene Cixous aimed to redefine the fixed symbolic structure. Her critique of the binary structure of language was directed towards the division it created between men and women, with men as a dominant figure and women as a regressive other that needs to be controlled. Pointing at the construction of such binaries as a product of men, she states the language of the society as Phallogocentric, "Self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory Phallogocentrism" (Cixous 879). Talking about the conditioning of the thought process such binaries create pushing women to the extreme peripheries, she remarks, "As soon as they begin to speak...they are taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous" (Cixous 887).

## **An overview: Feminism**

Feminism encompasses various social and political movements that attempt to achieve political, social, economic, and personal rights for women. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Spivak's *Can the Subaltern speak?* are some of the important contributions to feminist writing. Simone de Beauvoir states, 'one is not born, rather becomes a woman...it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...described as feminine' (101). According to M.H Abrams, "Patriarchal ideology pervades writings that are categorized as great literature and women invariably occupy a subservient and marginal position" (102). One drawback of Western Feminism is the tendency to homogenize the experience of women through the Eurocentric lens, which results in the failure to take into account the real problems of women from diverse backgrounds. Feminism in India is an alteration of Western Feminism to suit the current trends with the emphasis on self-realization and self-awareness. It also engages in building meaningful alliances with men. Beena G. in *Vision and Re-Vision: Revisioning Mythologies, Rethinking Women*, cites Jasbir Jain's definition of Indo-centric Feminism as "a moral self-reflection, a conquering of inner fears and a realization of self-worth, a feminism that does not abandon values or relationships but goes on to create new ones" (Jain:2011)

Androcentrism basically refers to the general tendency to center the world around men's needs and perspectives while relegating women's desire and aspiration to the periphery. This dominant space, however, in recent times underwent a massive change with the coming of radical feminists like Helene Cixous, Adrienne Rich, Elaine Showalter, and Kate Millet, among many who emphasized the need to formulate a language and write back, to explore the unexplored. Feminism as a theoretical approach not only provides the depiction of women at their own hands but also the pattern in which the mind is conditioned. It recognizes the prevailing forms of oppression and creates a space that allows them to counteract. While not devoid of shortcomings, as an approach, Feminism also provides a critique of Patriarchy that victimizes or burdens both men and women. Indo-Centric Feminism today is more than mere questioning of space for women or about the men and women divide. It focuses on the emancipation of women from the oppression of all forms and the freedom of choice. Central to Indo-centric Feminism voicing the need for a just and equitable society for both men and women. According to the Functionalist School of Thoughts in the study of Mythology, Every Myth has a function. One specific purpose being Patriarchy setting down social and behavioral norms. From Eve's quest for knowledge comes the notion of fallen women who surrendered to Temptation. Pandora and her curiosity arise the idea of women being the cause of all miseries in the world; Supernakha's rebellion and sexual desire earn her the title of the wild, brazen woman. All this while Mythology is considered the realm of the men, the result of the collective male imagination. Mythology reiterates and establishes certain stereotypes that become integrally rooted in a society influencing the way society operates. The generation of Sita as a role model for women even in the present context due to her docile and subservient nature is the result of the internalization of Patriarchy, which can be so deep-rooted that women themselves fail to see that they are oppressed, thereby failing to question such patriarchal setup. In the same vein Utkarsh Patel in his online lecture series, cites Draupadi, who is considered as the first feminist of Indian mythology and her failure to ask the right question as a result of such conditioning of the mind and emphasized the need to revise and re-look the Androcentric narratives to recreate new narratives that are multidimensional.

Re-visioning refers to the act of looking back, of seeing old narratives from a new perspective. As Adrienne Rich states, revisionist- mythmaking is "as much an act of survival for women as one of culture." The surge in the retelling and rewriting of myths is clear evidence of the attempt to look back into the past and renegotiate the space women occupied in textual representations. Nayantara Sahgal remarks when epics are re-examined, "new Sitas and Savitris will arise, stripped of false sanctity and crowned with the human virtue of courage." (Sahgal: 1988).

## **Kavita Kane as a Feminist Writer**

Kavita Kane is an established name in the field of retelling mythologies from the feminist perspective. She lends a voice to the women at the peripheries and attempts to bring the characters closer to the common people by depicting them as humans with emotions and flaws. *Sita's Sister*, *Karna's Wife*, and *Lanka's Princess* are some novels to her credit. As the title of her works suggests, she empathetically attempts to bring to light the often voiceless and misrepresented characters from the Epics and give them an identity that was deprived to them. *Lanka's Princess* is a novel about Supernakha, the sister of the all-powerful Ravan, who is often represented as wild, sly, and manipulative credited as being the instigator of war between Ram and Ravan. By attributing her with human emotions, Kane cuts through the binary structure prescribed for women by basically emphasizing the idea that she is a human first who can love, hate, and have compassion just as any other being, thereby attempting to unarmour the inhuman Myth attributed to her.

### ***The Lanka's Princess***

Typically regarded as the Helen of Lanka, she is believed to have been the instigator of war that brought the downfall of the kingdom of Lanka. Kane's retelling emphasizes on the transition of the innocent Meenakshi to the long-clawed Supernakha, who surrenders to none. She is more a victim than a victimizer, misunderstood, and hated for her indomitable spirit. Patriarchy not only controls the gender binaries but also dictates what is acceptable and not acceptable within a specific culture. The concept of 'good' and 'bad,' 'cultured' and 'uncultured,' 'moral' and immoral. When characters like Supernakha fail to adhere to the said norms of what is expected, she becomes a rakshasi that does not fit into a structure of Patriarchy. If Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana represent the 'good' and 'cultured,' we have Ravana, Kumbhakarna, and Supernakha as the 'bad' and 'uncultured.' In this context, Revisionist narratives play a vital role in looking beyond the binaries and bring to center stage the fluidity of spaces. If situated within the traditional conformist narratives of the Epic, the only account we have of Supernakha is the event leading to her mutilation when she approaches Ram and Lakshmanain, which her mutilation is justified on the ground that it was a punishment of adultery. She occupies the space of the 'other,' 'the uncivilized,' and the 'bad.' She is marginalized on the grounds of her race as a member of the Asura Clan. Secondly, she is othered as a woman in the gender space, and Thirdly, for her sexual prowess and inclinations, she is othered, putting her in opposition to the ideal woman. Kavita Kane presents Supernakha as unapologetic, well-learned, expressive, and daring, bringing her to the center stage and giving her the voice to be heard. Her transition from the innocent Menakshi to Supernakha is filled with irremediable pain, rage, and suffering. As a girl, she is rejected by her mother, abandoned by her father, whom she loved the most, overshadowed and overpowered by three powerful brothers destined for greatness, suffered the pain of losing her husband, son and lost everyone she loved in her quest for Revenge. Her constant manifestation into Supernakha is her response to the exploit and sufferings she witnesses, a form of retaliation. Her brother's killing of her pet lamb to the killing of the people she loved

results in the death of the meek and emotional Meenakshi and the birth of the wild and untamed Supernakha. By presenting the embodiment of the innocent and the wild in one individual, Kane brings to light the ideathat the binaries that define 'good' and 'bad' are inadequate and that an individual can have both attributes. The portrayal of all the women from Sita, Mandodari to Supernakha stands in contrast to the traditional narrative. Supernakha is rebellious, Mandodari and Sita come off as resilient. Although Dutiful and subservient, they don't hesitate to defy their husband when the need occurs. Although men are seen as strong and powerful when Ravan lost his son and close ones, he is a defeated man, and only Mandodari is willing to support him. Kane establishes this further by portraying the co-dependence between men and women, "The men needed their women, and often they did not know it." (Kane 246).

Her inability to kill Lakshmana's child and mutilate Urmila was mainly because of the compassion she possessed within. She was not a monster as everyone called her, for it takes immense strength and compassion to forgive. By portraying her as a compassionate woman, even in her defeat, she is victorious.

Kane's narrative also brings into question a lot of issues that are often not addressed, one most pertinent being the justification of Supernakha's Mutilation by Lakshmana on the orders of Rama:

What were they furious about—me attacking Sita or me assaulting their chastity, their Moral righteousness? Was it their apprehension for my uninhibited behavior? assuming it to be an overt vulgarity, an open display of unleashed carnal anarchy? Was that why they had laughed at me, ridiculing me in their contempt and amazement, their arrogant condescendence condemning me for my feminine profanity (Kane 172)

Women in myths are often presented as the cause of conflict. Helen is often known as the destroyer of Troy, Eve as the cause of deprivation for humans to enter heaven, Sita, Supernakha, and Draupadi as the reason for war. This tendency to associate women as the reason for destruction and chaos is re-examined in the narrative. Ramayana basically is said to have been a war fought to save Sita from Ravana. In *Lanka's Princess* Supernakha is depicted as the prime mover of bloodshed in the Epic. However, this bloodshed is not primarily caused because of women; the ulterior motive often is the need to establish oneself as the all-powerful. When Supernakha is abducted by Kuber, it provided Ravana with the most justifiable reason to wage war on him and seize the throne of Lanka:

Her act of self-defense had been blown up as an act of bravery, a reason to War. It had been desperation, not courage, for there had been none to save her but herself. She had fought like a tigress, and now her brother, prowling and provoked, had caught the scent of blood. (Kane: 58)

The war with Ram was primarily because of his hurt ego. Firstly the humiliation at Sita's swayamvar and his inability to protect his sister fuels his humiliation as the all-powerful king. It is the hunger for power and the false concept of masculinity associated with war that drives Ravan to his downfall. The conversation between Supernakha and Kumbhakarna is critical in this context. When Kumbha accuses her of her insatiable hunger for Revenge, she retorts back, "Don't place the blame of the war on me, Kumbha. You know better. It is Ravan and his mad obsession for women and war and acquisition that this war is on us" (Kane 206).

The novel projecting the plight of women does not set aside the men. Patriarchy victimizes both men and women. All men don't hold an equal position in society. Younger men, men from the lower caste, and men exhibiting feminine qualities are often a subject of exploitation and marginalization. Kumbha, Vibhishan, and Lakshman, as the younger brothers of Ravan and Ram, are continuously stirred into war irrespective of their personal opinions. Kumbha accepts his death following Ravan's order. The already strained relationship between Ravan and Vibhishan results in the latter betraying Ravan due to the constant humiliation he faces at the hands of his elder brother. We find Lakshman tormented by his guilt for killing Kumar, which reached a climax on his realization that Kumar was the son of Supernakha, whom he mutilated on the orders of Ram and ultimately resulted in him taking his own life.

If mythology possesses the ability to create stereotypes, it also exhibits the strength to counteract as we have seen in the many rewriting of Myths, which reflects the universal adherence to broaden the perspectives towards an all-inclusive one that will not only enrich the epics but in turn create an in-depth understanding of the society we exist in. In bringing to the center stage the voice of the marginalized, Kane succeeds in subverting the rigid binary structure by emphasizing fluidity and openness, to look beyond the rigid binary structure, to revisit and find the truth hidden by the dominant voices.

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