

Gender Discrimination and Quest of Female Identity in Kavita Kane's the Fisher Queen's Dynasty

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Abstract

The Mahabharata, an ancient Indian epic, is replete with mythological stories which depict the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas over the throne of Hastinapur. It is a man's world where women are given no space to express themselves. Kavita Kane, an Indian author, brings a marginal character, Satyavati, to the forefront in her novel, The Fisher Queen's Dynasty. The novel is a reworking of the traditional narratives of the Mahabharata. Reworking or retelling has always endured as an effective strategy to interrogate dominant ideologies and articulate resistant ideologies. The present paper tries to explore the journey of Satyavati from a humble fisher girl to the reigning queen of Hastinapur. It delineates the way Satyavati tries to overturn cultural stereotypes by moving out of the orthodox cultural frame in order to reverse gender roles. Satyavati's voice is a female assertion of independence and identity determination. It is concerned with the marginalization, repression and subjugation of women. The paper tries to explore the significant role played by the protagonist, Satyavati in regulating the plot and the subsequent turn of events and incidents in the novel.

Keywords- Subversion, Patriarchy, Gender discrimination, Myth, Identity

INTRODUCTION

Stories of the Mahabharata have been transmitted from one generation to the next conveying certain philosophical truths, ethical norms, cultural and moral values. Contemporary female authors often attempt to give expression to the silenced voices of marginalized characters who are regularly ignored in the grand narratives of Indian mythology. In a society where gender discrimination is prevalent and women are treated as the inferior sex or the "other" object, there is a desperate need for strong

and independent female role models. The Mahabharata is an ancient Hindu epic which provides us with very powerful female characters who were victims of patriarchal social injustices but had courage and conviction to overcome the predicaments inflicted upon them. As Chaturvedi Badrinath (2008) says, "In the stories through which the Mahabharata speaks of life, women occupy a central place [...] each one of them, in her own way, is a teacher to mankind as to what truth and goodness in their many dimensions are" (p.8).

Kavita Kane is an Indian novelist and a former journalist. She excels in retelling the stories from the Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Her debut novel, *Karna's Wife: the Outcast's Queen* achieved a great popularity and paved the way for writing other novels like *Sita's Sister*, *Lanka's Princess*, *Menaka's Choice*, *Ahalya's Awakening* and *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*. She gives a different dimension to the stories by narrating them from a different perspective, generally through the viewpoint of marginalized characters. The narrative of the Mahabharata is male centric, and focuses on the valour and skills of great warriors like Bhishm, Guru Dronacharya, King Drupad, Pandavas, sons of King Pandu and the Kauravas, sons of King Dhritarashtra. Though Satyawati occupies a considerable textual space in the mainstream narratives of the Mahabharata, she is never celebrated as an ideal woman. Her character is marked with social stigma. The character of Satyawati is portrayed as an ambitious, ruthless woman who could stoop to abysmal levels of inhumanity or cruelty to appease her power-hungry stomach. Despite her attempt to continue the legacy of the Kuru dynasty, Satyawati is assumed to be the main cause of the annihilation of the Kuru dynasty. Kavita Kane through her revisionist novel, *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* subverts the patriarchal notions of women and gives enough space to the marginalized, overlooked characters to unveil their suppressed feelings and desires.

Gender Discrimination

Satyavati was known as Kali because of her dark complexion. Satyawati was the unacknowledged and dejected daughter of Uparichara Vasu, the

king of Chedi. Once, the king in extreme excitement spilled his semen and wrapped it in a leaf to provide it to his wife so that she could produce children but unfortunately the semen was swallowed by a fish named, Adrika who was a cursed apsara. When the fish was caught and cut open, twin babies were found: a boy and a girl. The king accepted the boy with gratitude, but handed over the girl to impoverished Dasharaj, chieftain of the fisher community who happily adopted her. Abandonment of girls by their parents is not a new phenomenon. As A. S. Altekar (2014) points out, "In ancient times in all patriarchal societies, the birth of a girl was generally an unwelcome event. Almost everywhere the son was valued more than the daughter. He was a permanent economic asset of the Family" (p.3). Kane has designed the story in such a way that it was Satyawati's abandonment by her father that made her determined or ambitious to achieve the royal status of a queen. It sowed the seed of desire to get a life of which she has been deprived since her childhood. While her brother was enjoying the hedonistic life of a royal prince, she had to struggle to earn her livelihood by ferrying people across the river, Yumuna. Kane describes the grudge of Satyawati in her own words "She detested the way the nobles and royalty lived their lives, while she was cursed to a life of hard work and stench, with no hope of ever bridging the gap" (Kane, 2017, p.10). Kane makes a revelation that Satyawati's mother was not an apsara, but a fisher woman, Dasharaj's own sister. King Vasu invented a story about her birth in order to keep his prestige intact. As Pattanaik (2010) says, "The story of Uparichara's 'joyful spurt of semen' in the forest and its consumption by a fish is perhaps an

elaborate tale to cover a king's indiscretion with a fisherwoman" (p.59).

Satyavati's Deviance from Patriarchal Norms and Assertion of Her Own Sexuality

Kane has invented a story that Satyavati's mother was a fisher girl, Dashraj's own sister who was impregnated and abandoned by King Vasu. This story brings forth the plight of the lower class women who are doubly marginalized and treated only as sex objects. Simon de Beauvoir (2011) discusses the situation and the position of women in her book, *The Second Sex*: "She is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called "the sex" meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex [...]. He is the subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (p.25). However, Satyavati would never be a victim of patriarchal evil mongers who treated women only as sex objects. Kane has probed deep into the psyche of Satyavati and expressed her suppressed desires and feelings which have not been described in the original Mahabharata. There are some textual references which show how Kane makes it a retelling of the Mahabharata. Rishi Parashar acts as a catalyst who gives a new dimension to Satyavati's life. The original Mahabharata shows that Satyavati was the victim of Rishi Parashar's sexual urge and the benefits which she got from him were the generosity of Rishi Parashara. But Kane's Satyavati is very practical and assertive about her sexuality. Although, Parashar tried to seduce her but it was Satyavati's intellectual mind which prevented her from surrendering herself to the carnal desire of Parashar without making some conditions which could turn her life: unimpaired chastity, eternal youth and fragrant body. Satyavati bore the child

of Parashar in her womb and gave birth to Vyas. She gave the custody of her son to his father and never regretted her deeds because she did not want to be bound by the task of child rearing. She did not want to be marked by the stigma of an unwed mother. Instead she wanted an honourable life through the sacred bond of marriage. She refused to be a Rishi's wife and to live an ascetic's life in an ashram. She knew that she was born a princess and she did acquire the qualities to be a queen. She always felt an urge to get back the birthright which she deserved. Satyavati defied the norms of morality which was designed only to subjugate women. She wanted to employ her beauty and lust as a means to achieve her goal by seducing men. She knew that society will consider her unscrupulous for her mischievous attitude. She would rather like to be known as unscrupulous by the society than a mere victim of artificial moral code of purity. She did not find anything wrong as she firmly declared "If men can use women, why can't women get something out of men? Beauty and lust is just that- a means to an end" (Kane, 2017, p.32). She knew how to turn the situation in her favour and achieved her gain by implying her manipulating strategy. With the blessing of Parashar she acquired an irresistible beauty to attract whomever she wanted. Luck favoured her and Shantanu, king of Hastinapur became the victim of her enticing beauty and wanted to make love to Satyavati. But, she did not want to be another member in Shantanu's harem. She wanted to be the queen of Hastinapur by marrying Shantanu. Her father, Dasharaj thought a step further as he not only wanted to secure his daughter's life, but he also wanted Satyavati's son to be the heir to the throne of Hastinapur. These conditions made it difficult for Shantanu because

he had already declared that Devavrat, his first son by his first wife, Ganga, would be the future king. The problem was resolved by Devavrat as he took a vow that he would remain a life-long celibate and would not marry in his lifetime for the sake of his father's happiness. So it is for Satyavati's claim that Devavrat took a terrible vow and acquired the name Bhishm. This one oath changed the whole story. It is assumed that the story could be different if Bhishm had not taken that vow.

The term "patriarchy" is defined by the feminist critic, V. Geeta (2009) as a power system where male members in general and father figure in particular rule over the family and the society. It is not only the subordination of women, but the domination over the weaker section of the society including men. In literature, it appears to be a critical concept to identify a system where certain liberties and privileges are given to men as their natural birth-right while the women are deprived of the same privileges. Women in India are idealized when they conform to the rules of conduct prescribed by the patriarchal society such as submissive daughter, devoted wife and doting mother. Manu (2012), the progenitor of mankind prescribed in the Manusmriti, the laws of mankind that women must be kept under the domination of the male members of their families. Before marriage a woman remains under the care of her father, after marriage she is in control of her husband and in old age she has to rely upon her sons. Woman is never fit for independence. But Satyavati defies the stereotypical norms of the patriarchal society with her independent and free will. Before marriage she earned her livelihood by ferrying people across the river, Yumuna. Her personal ambitions had a broader perspective as

they were linked to the welfare of her fisher community. She not only thought of her family but she was involved in resolving various problems faced by the fisher community. She always thought of the betterment and the upliftment of the fisher community because they were the weaker section of the society and they were marginalized people. She raised a voice by reminding the King of the injustice meted out to her people.

Satyavati's Role as a Queen and Women's Role in the Creation Myth

Satyavati's journey from being a mere fisher girl, ignored and humiliated for her dark complexion and unbearable body stench to becoming a beautiful madonna with an irresistible body fragrance and the queen of Hastinapur is praiseworthy. Though Satyavati was neglected by the people of the kingdom, gradually she conquered the heart of the people with the craft of administration and the art of diplomacy. After the death of her husband and her elder son, she became very worried about the heir to the throne. She became desperate to get her son Vichitravirya married as soon as possible. Satyavati forced Bhishm to abduct three princesses of Kashi with a political motive: "By marrying all three of them into Hastinapur, Kashi will be solely ours. If the three princesses marry three different suitors, we will be in conflict with them all our lives" (Kane, 2017, p.213). When Bhishm gave justification for not abducting the three princesses against their wishes, Satyavati reminded him that there were 8 types of marriages practiced by royals. One is the "practice of veershulkaa" when the suitor shows his valour and power in carrying away the bride after defeating the other suitors. Knowing that Vichitravirya was physically weak and could not

perform this task, Satyawati ordered Bhishm to do the job on behalf of his brother and the consequence was disastrous for Bhishm. Bhishm forcefully brought the three sisters Amba, Ambika and Ambalika as brides for his brother. Before the marriage ceremony Amba revealed that she was in love with King Shalva, and she could not marry Vichitryavirya. Bhishm returned her to Shalva, but he refused to accept her as she was won by Bhishm and he valued his honour as a Kshatriya more than his love. Such was the fate of woman. Amba could not go back to her father. She held Bhishm responsible for her miserable condition and asked him to marry her but he also refused her because of his inviolable vow of celibacy. Amba was a very strong, powerful female character from the Mahabharata who was the victim of the patriarchal social system. She is an example of what the fury of a wrathful woman could do. She was burning with the flame of revenge. Lord Shiva blessed her that her desire of revenge would be fulfilled in her next birth and Amba was ready to die and immolated herself by jumping into a self-made pyre. In her next birth as Shikhandini, Amba fulfilled her desire of killing Bhishm.

It was an old belief that in the creation myth, man is important. Satyawati defied this age old belief and proved that in the creation myth woman plays a crucial role and man does not matter. Her last son died without leaving an heir to the throne of Hastinapur. She was disappointed within, but she did not allow her mental or emotional agony to shatter Hastinapur into fragments. She was doing what a queen should do. It was her firm determination to continue to rule whatever the situation may be as she said, "I will not be defeated. I have to find a way" (Kane, 2017,

p.270). She could go to any extent to continue the legacy. She pleaded with Bhishm to break his vow of celibacy and marry his brother's daughters. She tried all means to influence Bhishm but to no avail. Finding no other way, she never hesitated to summon her abandoned son, Vyas. She urged him to father the children of her daughters-in-law through *niyog*. *Niyog* is a child producing system a husband has over his wife, where he requests her to have a child through another man. According to the rule, Satyawati could not force her daughters-in-law but she deviated from the rule as she was firm in her obsession to continue the legacy, "They will have to obey me for the sake of the crown" (Kane, 2017, p.282). Apparently it shows Satyawati's cruelty and lack of conscience, but through this *niyog* she was giving her daughters-in-law the power to break the age old belief of patriarchy that males are important in creating their progeny. "[...] it is the women who give birth and create new life, a new hope, by perpetuating their family line, their dynasty, their clan, their race. Though men claim it to be theirs, in the name of patriarchy" (Kane, 2017, p.284). Satyawati's zeal for heirs for her dynasty was something beyond her ambitions. She got three heirs but none of them were perfect to be king. Dhritarashtra was blind, Pandu was impotent and though Vidur was perfect he could not be the king because of his low-born status because he was the son of a maid servant. Satyawati questioned this marginalization on the basis of class and caste, "Why can we not make new laws, new rules that break shackles, instead of changing us? If I fisher girl, could be queen, I shall see to it that a maid's son gets his rights!" (Kane, 2017, p.314).

CONCLUSION

To secure a woman's place in the society is the greatest challenge. Women are the harbingers of change in a society. To fulfil this basic need is the greatest challenge in today's context. Without women's progress there will be no revolution. It is noticeable that since ancient days women have been suffering for various reasons. The main obstacle in their progress in life is the identity crisis, where they do not possess a secure place. They are oscillating like a pendulum to secure their individuality. Lack of accessibility has always placed them in a secondary position. The status of women has been a topic of grave discussion since ancient era. It encompasses various issues of education for girls, economic empowerment, political participation, rape, female foeticide, domestic violence, dowry system etc. Throughout the world, various rules of conduct structured by the patriarchal power deny women their basic rights. This gender inequality hinders the progress of the civilization. Talking about India's culture, the wives are called 'Ardhangini' (the better half), and without them, any crucial work is impossible to accomplish. Hence, they share equal positions with men. But does this concretize in reality? The contemporary Indian English fiction writers have tried to demonstrate the roles and identities of women in family and society. In the time of the Mahabharata, women did not have enough scope to express themselves. Satyawati, Kunti, Draupadi were very strong characters at that time. Satyawati is one of the most misunderstood characters of the Mahabharata. Kavita Kane's 'The Fisher Queen' Dynasty, the alternative retelling of the Mahabharata, depicts very skilfully the growth and development of the life of Satyawati. She is portrayed as a strong and

independent woman who is able to fight for her own rights and take her own independent decisions. Her life is a story of transformations from Kali to Satyawati, Matsyagandha to Yojanagandha, a fisher girl to a queen. She made choices of her own and succeeded in attaining those choices. Satyawati had the ability to be practical, ask logical questions, and participate in debates and discussions. Her obsession to make her own progeny the king of Hastinapur and her consequent plans that she executes to fulfil her desire were her mode of resistance against the patriarchal institution that insists on the continuation of the line of the fathers. From a fisher girl to becoming a queen signifies her shift from private space to public space that is meant for men rather than women. Her view of women as creators is a radical deviation from stereotypical patriarchal beliefs. Satyawati "...had an important role in the life of the venerable Bhishm, and also as the mother of the great sage Vyasa who appears throughout in the Mahabharata as the most influential and highly revered adviser to the Kauravas and Pandavas whenever necessary" (Bhawalkar, 1999, p.397).

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