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Satyavati Through the Lens of Intersectionality: Gender, Caste, and Power in Karthika Nair's *Until The Lions*

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Abstract:

This article examines the character of Satyavati in Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions* through the lens of intersectionality, exploring how her life is shaped by the overlapping forces of caste, class, and gender. Rising from a marginalized background to become the queen of Hastinapur, Satyavati challenges entrenched social hierarchies while simultaneously reinforcing them in her role as a matriarch. Her interactions with other subaltern characters, such as Poorna, Amba, Shikhandi, highlight the complex dynamics of power and resistance within the epic. Rather than portraying Satyavati in binaries of victimhood or villainy, the article presents her as a multifaceted figure whose actions reflect the contradictions inherent in navigating systemic oppression. Through Nair's reinterpretation, Satyavati becomes a powerful voice that both embodies and contests the intersecting structures that define her world.

Keywords:
intersectionality, caste, class, gender, subaltern, power dynamics, patriarchy, resistance, agency, marginalization, reinterpretation.

Introduction

Intersectionality, originally formulated within the framework of Black feminist thought, emerged as a tool to uncover layered forms of oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality to explore "the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political and representational aspects of violence against women of color" (1224). Today, the scope of intersectional theory has widened to include an expansive range of identity markers, such as age, ethnicity, religion, caste, professional background, education, and physical ability. Vivian May notes that intersectionality "offers ways to evaluate a situation from multiple stand points, creates room to identify shared logics while accounting for differences and can be used to approach tensions or contradictions as having logics and implications of their own, rather than treating them primarily as problems to smooth over" (65).

In recent literary discourse, narratives shaped by intersectionality have gained prominence as a transformative approach that questions traditional literary frameworks and revitalizes established stories. Intersectional narratives bring together varied voices, cultural contexts, and stylistic methods to create multifaceted portrayals of human experiences. These narratives not only foreground marginalized perspectives but also examine how overlapping systems of oppression—such as caste, gender, and class—shape individual and collective realities.

As Hancock observes, intersectionality "identifies the hegemonic, structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal playing fields upon which race, gender, class, and other categories or traditions of difference interact to produce society" (74). The strength of such storytelling lies in its ability to engage readers intellectually and emotionally, fostering a deep understanding of societal structures and the human condition. Vivian May emphasizes this function, noting that "intersectionality is meant to be applied to real world problems, to unsettle oppressive logics, to plumb gaps or silences for suppressed meanings and implications, and to rethink how we approach liberation politics" (May 7, 8)

Within the context of the *Mahabharata*, these theoretical insights can illuminate the epic's portrayal of subaltern experiences. Crenshaw further elaborates: "Intersectionality is a conceptualization of the problem that attempts to capture both the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more axes of subordination. It specifically addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other discriminatory systems create background inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes—and the like" (178).

While rooted in Black feminist thought, intersectionality offers a compelling analytical framework for examining long-standing structures of marginalization within Indian society. The experiences of socially oppressed groups in India often mirror those of Black women in Western contexts, particularly in their navigation of multiple forms of exclusion. In this context, intersectionality becomes a vital tool for reading contemporary *Mahabharata* retellings, which seek to expose and challenge entrenched social norms. Mythology, as a mirror of societal values and anxieties, offers fertile ground for intersectional reinterpretation. Contemporary retellings of the *Mahabharata* through such a lens provide renewed insight into the epic's cultural and political relevance. By giving voice to characters historically sidelined and by questioning established hierarchies, these retellings inject fresh life into the ancient narrative. The *Mahabharata* becomes not merely a timeless epic but a reflective surface for examining the power imbalances and structural inequalities that persist in today's world. In doing so, these adaptations challenge dominant narratives and promote inclusivity by showcasing a diversity of lived experiences. The reimagining of the epic from multiple viewpoints highlights mythology's ongoing capacity to engage with evolving cultural discourses and to catalyze social reflection.

Satyavati: A Portrait of Intersecting Identities

Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions* reimagines the *Mahabharata* through the voices of those silenced by mainstream narratives—especially the subaltern, the dispossessed, and the marginalized. Among these, Satyavati stands out as a character whose life encapsulates the complexities of **intersectionality**, a term that refers to the overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage based on social categories like caste, class, gender, and sexuality. In *Until the Lions*, Nair gives Satyavati a layered voice—one that confronts both the structures of oppression and the contradictions within her own agency.

In the *Mahabharata*, Satyavati rises from humble origins as the daughter of a fisherman to become the queen of Hastinapur and the matriarch of the Kuru dynasty. Her narrative is one of extraordinary ascent, but it is also riddled with social tensions. She occupies multiple identities simultaneously: a woman in a patriarchal society, a person from a marginalized caste entering royal power, and a mother who negotiates dynastic fate. In *Until the Lions*, her character becomes a vessel to explore how these intersecting social categories shape—and are shaped by—power.

Satyavati's decision to seek the help of sage Parashara to transform her physical appearance is not just an act of survival but a defiant stand against Brahminical hegemony. Her transformation challenges the aesthetic and moral codes imposed by dominant structures, enabling her to gain temporary agency within a system that seeks to confine her. Similarly, her calculated use of beauty and sexuality to attract the king and secure marriage defies the passivity traditionally assigned to women in epic literature. Satyavati, through her calculated moves, contests the patriarchal notions of female docility and confronts the caste system that once denied her a voice, despite her birthright as the daughter of a "fisher king." Jayatri Ghosh in her essay "Satyavati: The Matriarch of the *The*

Mahabharatha." Published in *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India*, edited by Mandakranta Bose observes :

Satyavati embodies the paradox of a woman who is both empowered and disempowered within a patriarchal order. She is able to control her own destiny to a certain extent, but this control is limited by the larger forces of social and political power that are dominated by men. (Ghosh 42)

Her actions are further complicated by her decisions as queen. At a powerful point in Nair's telling, Satyavati, who was once oppressed, becomes a queen who dominates and exploits others. She forces her widowed daughters-in-law to sleep with her son Vyasa, asserting control over their bodies for the sake of dynasty. In *Until the Lions*, Nair masterfully illustrates the duality within Satyavati: she is both the subaltern who resisted domination and the ruler who enacts it. In her interaction with Poorna, a palace servant, Satyavati is confronted for these very choices. Poorna's bold critique reveals the blurred lines of power and victimhood, forcing a revaluation of Satyavati's legacy—not as a hero or villain, but as a complex intersectional figure navigating survival, ambition, and systemic power.

Patricia Hill Collins' insight that "like men, women are, unsurprisingly, human beings and thus are capable of both compassion and cruelty, co-operation and competition" (Collins, 1773), aptly describes Satyavati. She is not confined to a singular identity or morality. Her journey showcases how power and subjugation are often entangled—how one can resist a system in one context while perpetuating it in another.

Satyavati in Dialogue with Other Intersectional Figures

Satyavati's narrative intersects meaningfully with those of other marginalized figures in *Until the Lions*. Characters like Amba, Shikhandi, Ekalavya, Hidimbi, and Karna each reflect distinct intersections of identity and resistance, forming a collective commentary on the epic's structural hierarchies. Amba's story reflects gendered violence and patriarchal control. Her rebirth as Shikhandi—an individual whose queer identity becomes a weapon against patriarchy—echoes Satyavati's own challenge to the gendered norms of power. Where Satyavati manipulates the system from within, Shikhandi defies it from without, embodying queerness and rebellion in equal measure.

Ekalavya, denied education due to his tribal origins, experiences caste-based exclusion similar to what Satyavati initially faces. His forced sacrifice—offering his thumb to Drona—mirrors the injustices that Satyavati, too, must maneuver through to gain legitimacy in a Brahminical order. Hidimbi, a rakshasi and forest dweller, is yet another character who, like Satyavati, is excluded from elite society despite embodying strength, wisdom, and civility. Her marginalization due to caste, class, and gender renders her an outsider in a world that celebrates less capable men born into privilege. Karna's wife Vrishali presents the voice of a man who remains subaltern despite his valour and political elevation. Karna's internal conflict between his identity as a suta and his recognition as a kshatriya mirrors Satyavati's struggle between her fisherwoman roots and her queenly status.

These figures do not merely parallel Satyavati—they amplify her significance. Their stories form a constellation of resistance that exposes the epic's rigid social codes, while *Until the Lions* repositions them as central, not peripheral, to the unfolding drama.

Reclaiming Power Through Intersectionality

In *Until the Lions*, Karthika Nair reclaims the stories of the marginalized by allowing characters like Satyavati to speak in their own voices. Through this lens, Satyavati becomes more than a political manipulator or maternal figure—she becomes a symbol of intersectional resistance, wielding her agency within the narrow spaces afforded to her. Her character demonstrates that marginalization is not a singular experience but a layered and evolving process. She navigates power as both victim and enforcer, subaltern and sovereign, woman and wielder of dynastic destiny. In giving Satyavati a complex voice, Nair challenges readers to rethink notions of virtue, power, and justice. She presents a world in which survival often necessitates contradiction, and where those at the intersections of oppression may also wield the sharpest tools for transformation. Through such intersectional

characters, Karthika Nair talks about the experiences of "people whose identity crosses the boundaries of traditionally constructed groups" (Dill 5).

Conclusion

Satyavati's reimagining in *Until the Lions* invites a deeper engagement with the ways in which power, identity, and resistance intersect in layered and often uncomfortable ways. Her story compels us to move beyond binary judgments of right and wrong, victim and oppressor. But it urges us to acknowledge the fluidity of identity and the complexity of navigating entrenched hierarchies. By foregrounding her voice, Karthika Nair not only reclaims a silenced figure from the margins of epic history but also exposes the structural contradictions that shape human choices. Satyavati's journey—marked by ambition, resilience, and compromise—offers a compelling reflection on what it means to survive and assert agency within systems designed to suppress it.

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