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From periphery to the centre- a feminist study of kavitakane's Menaka's choice

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ABSTRACT

Women are forged through centuries of patriarchal impositions. The laws of Manu have imposed certain rules on women during the Vedictimes. The third face of feminism deals with the self discovery of women. The epic heroines were voiceless because of the social conventions set by the male dominated society. These epics treated women as subordinates and inferior. This attitude of the myths being created and criticised by men has compelled the modern women writers to retell the myths from their perspective. Kavita Kane has tried to decode this gender consciousness through her novels. Menaka, Surpanaka, Urmila, the minor but important characters in the epics who were designated and stay in the margin are pulled to the centre and are given space to express their desires and rights.

KEY WORDS

Manusmriti, Subservience, Myths, Margin, Centre

Women are forged through patriarchal impositions through centuries. The laws of Manu written during the – century has laid the foundation for subservient attitudes. The law has stated that a woman should be obedient to a man right from her birth. The woman has to serve her husband at any condition and if she deviates from this she has to stay away from home. According to the Manusmriti a woman is sole responsible in taking care of the house and its occupants even if the husband enjoys his life with another woman. But now women's outlook has broadened through education and now they try to decode the gender consciousness. The modern writers like Kavita Kane, Saiswaroop iyer and Anantha Neelakantan try to decode this gender consciousness through revisioning and revisiting the mythologies which plays a significant part in making Women adjunct

to men. This paper explores kavita kane's feminist approach towards mythologies. she began with karnas wife in 2014 and continues with sitas sister, Menaka's choice, lankas princess and then the fisher queens' dynasty.

Kavita kane's Menakas Choice is about a celestial nymph, born during the churning of the ocean by the asuras and devas. she was considered as one of the most beautiful of the heavenly apsaras. according to the mythologies Menaka was sent to the earth by indra to break the meditation of the rishi, vishwamithra. Menaka's role in Mahabharata is only that she seduces Viswamitra and bears a child named Shakuntala, the mother of bharatha of the Bharat dynasty. but Kavita kane has skilfully handled even the intricate details of the epic by telling the story from menakas view point. Kavita kane has exalted menaka as a strong, courageous and intelligent woman and not just an apsara.

According to the Hindu mythology, lord Bramaha created a man first and in order to give company to him, he created the woman. This image of woman as the second creation that started during the vedic times still exists in the minds of the people in the Indian society. The great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata written by the two great male writers, Valmiki and Vyasa concentrated only on exalting heroes and not the heroines. Kavita kane in one of her interview about her novel Menaka's choice says that, "our stories give us a very uni-dimensional image of a beautiful seductress. We don't associate courage and sacrifice with her"

So Kavita kane has reverted the image of menaka from women's perspective. Most of her novel concentrate in exalting the underestimated women characters in the epics.. she has used mythological stories to 'portray contemporary issues and sensibilities.' The novel is not just a love story of menaka and Viswamitra, but a story of a woman who fights back to surrender to her destiny.

The title menakas choice is paradoxical because Menaka, the apsara does not have any choice.

She was forced to obey the orders of lord Indra. Though Menaka is the most intelligent of all the other apsaras, she could not free herself from the clutches of Indra and her designated life. She wanted to get married leaving behind the rules of indralok. she tries hard to quit her profession and lead a happy life with Vishwvasu, a gandarva. Indra, ever envious of anyone who looks at Menaka and doubtful of his own ability as king of Gods, casts Visvasu out of heaven and to roam on the earth as a monster. He tells, "this is Indralok, these are Gandharvas and Apsaras who love but and make love but never marry"

Though Indra is jealous of Menaka, he is unable to let her go to the Earth and at same time Indra fears the growing power of viswamitra and plans to send Menaka to seduce vishwamitra. Menaka accepts the offer because she wanted to free herself from Indra and the Indralok. She feels happy when Sachi says,. She should be banished for her insubordination "to that Menaka replies that she is "battling for not only justice but for dignity" (pg 29) Through Menaka, Kavita Kane tries to explain the untold grief of the women in the patriarchal

society. Through this mythological figures she tries to equate the genders and it is through she claims the rights of women. She says that "status can be earned and not entitled to tell the world that it's not birth but worth which determines the outcome of one's life."

Indra considers all the apsaras as his 'Chattels' and has an upperhand in controlling them.

Menaka on the other hand stands on a 'war path, to put an end to her destiny. Kavita Kane lucidly expresses the emotion of a woman, suppressed under the banner of conventions and laws. Menaka's desire to have a family is short lived. She has to abandon her family on Earth and rejoin the immortals at Indralok. Menaka was ready to sacrifice her immortality for the sake of her daughter, Premavada when she was bitten by a snake. Menaka's battles for the destiny of Apsaras, inclusive of Rambha who was raped by Ravan and in turn was cursed by Nalakuber, his half brother that Ravan would die the moment when he forces himself on any woman. Kavita has not missed out even the minute details in the original myths.

Through her friend Kanva, we understand that Menaka is ‘neither faint nor feeble’. She does what she exactly wants to do suppressing her happiness. As sage Kanva says “you have – which is quite rare- the hunger for an alternative”

Kavita Kane has altered the view of Menaka as an Apsara, a seductress and a deceiver .

Menaka is portrayed as an independent, assertive and a responsible woman who also, ‘takes accountability for herself’ . Kavita Kane vividly surveys the emotions of Menaka right from her birth . Menaka, though weary of Indra's wickedness, never failed to question him, she asks “Why is it always women are defined by the men”(p 175)

It is Menaka who gives a choice to Indra , between a warring Vishwamitra or a Heaven without her’

“In an interview to the Hindu, about mythology Kane says,

If myths reflect the socio-cultural ethos of earlier times, they can also be used to contemporaries those same issues in today's world. Actually, nothing has changed. Love, rivalry, disappointment, war, anger, greed, all these emotions still exist. There's a chance of an alternative perspective by looking at the epics through the women and minor characters at that.” (The Hindu)

Menaka's Choice is one of the best novels of Kavita Kane that unveils the male supremacy over women. By focussing on the women characters in the epics, Kavita Kane draws them from the Margin to the Centre. Through her novels she emphasizes that Women no longer want to be on the periphery. The modern writers through their retellings demythify the gender conventions and remythify the Myths of Vedic period that has used supernatural elements , transmogrification and mystery as its characteristics. Kane has not employed any of the shape shifting devices and magic but still entices the readers by centre staging the ‘peripherals and silent catalyst’.

References

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