



Analysing Satyavati an epitome of Feminine Assertion and Resistance with special reference to Kavita Kane's The Fisher Queen's Dynasty

1. Mrs. Kirti Jhamb 2. Mrs. Jatinder Kohli,

1. Research Scholar 2. Professor

1. Government Arts College, Kota, India 2. Government Arts College, Kota, India

Abstract: Mythology as being male-oriented and male-cantered has always celebrated male glory, male deeds, and male achievements while female potential has always remained neglected. It is the strategy of patriarchy to use mythical narratives to relegate women to the roles of passive and silent figures. Feminine power receive little space and acknowledgement in the mythological narratives. There are many women characters in both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* who have not been given platform to exit independently. They have remained shadowy figures and their emotions are seen as inexplicable. This unjust portrayal of women in mythology has made feminist writers to write about female psyche and potential. They are revisiting mythology and recreating mythical stories from feminist perspective. Kavita Kané is one such feminist writer who has penned a chain of gynocentric fiction. She has picked up neglected and ignored female characters from mythology and placed them in the centre of the story. Satyavati is an unsung and unheard female character in the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*. She has always remained uncelebrated character. She is portrayed unfairly as an opportunist. But Kané has subverted the classical myth presenting Satyavati as a pioneer of feminism. The present paper analyses how the author has portrayed Satyavati as an epitome of feminine assertion and resistance.

Keywords: Mythology, feminism, patriarchy, assertion and resistance.

The character of Satyavati is one of the the most sidelined woman character of the epic *Mahabharata* by Sage Ved Vyasa. The depiction she finds in the grand narrative is that of a wicked and malevolent woman. The main stream writers present an androcentric projection of the character of Satyavati. It is believed that Satyavati is the genesis of all disagreements in the first version of the narrative. Because of this, it is easy to see why others have referred to her in a variety of ways, such as a malicious temptress, an opportunist, a misbegotten child, and a cold-hearted person. The author casts doubt on the decisions made by Satyavati by utilizing this idea. Kane challenges the patriarchal reading of Satyavati. In Kane's interpretation, the concept of women being reduced to their sexuality foreshadows the beginning of the central storyline

before it ever begins. Kané has picked up such a minor woman character from the periphery and placed her into the centre of the narrative. She has recreated the story of Satyavati narrating her side of story. She presents the character of Satyavati as a bold woman who moulds herself from a fisher girl to the queen of royal dynasty of Hastinapur. In Kane's retelling of the Mahabharata, Satyavati is given a voice to communicate her repressed feelings and sentiments, which are not included in the traditional readings of the tale of the Mahabharata.

In an interview with Sayantani Chakraborty she tells us what has intrigued her to tell the story of Satyavati, “She is my favourite character in the Mahabharat, I confess! I see her largely as the most political person in the epic, the seeds of which are sown in the later narrative as the story unfolds. Before her arrival, the plot is pretty tame. She provides - and instigates - the drama which lasts right through the very end of the Mahabharat, even after the Kurukshetra. But then, what do we know of this woman? We see her as a widowed queen mother who ruled her own future and her family and the kingdom besides that of Bhishma. She unmade and made him. She turned him from Devavrat to Bhishma, while transforming herself astutely from Matsyagandha to Satyavati and in doing so, changed the lives of all those in the epic. Yet we don't often fathom her significance. She was the queen in every sense.”

Again in an interview with Adila Matra from India Today, Kané expresses her fascination for Satyavati as, “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.”(updated Feb. 11, 2018)

In her book *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, Kane explores the mythical Mahabharata heroine Satyavati and situates her in contemporary society. Through this retelling, Kané unfolds the sufferings and struggle of Satyavati and her transformative journey from rags to riches. The depiction Satyavati finds in this retelling is that of a bold, assertive, free spirited twenty first century woman who crosses domestic walls; enters into the political arena; fights for her rights; makes her own choices and acts freely. Throughout the story, Satyavati is the main subject of attention. Bhishm narrates her tale, emphasising both her admirable traits and her objectives. The author also exemplifies how she reacts to prejudice based on her social standing and gender. This book, written from Satyavati's perspective, analyses some of the Mahabharata's most important features. She was referred to as a "Fisher Girl" because of her status as a social outcast. It suggests that caste consciousness pervaded society throughout that historical era. Satyavati is represented as a victim of the system. Kané, through the persona of Satyavati, illustrates the anxiety of a woman from a lower socioeconomic level who has to battle against oppression that is hegemonic and based on caste, class and gender. She speaks on the challenges faced by an outcast woman.

Satyavati's life has been unbearably difficult since birth. She experiences rejection right after she is born. She is the "unacknowledged and deserted"(5) daughter of a king. Her mother, Adrika, a poor outcast woman was "seduced, impregnated and abandoned"(30) by Uparichar Vasu, the king of Chedi. She died after giving birth to twins- a boy and a girl. The king "accepted the son because he was childless at the time... But refused to keep" the daughter.(30) Then she was brought up as a fisher girl by her maternal uncle Dashrath, a fisher man. Though she was the daughter of a king yet she had to live the life as a fisher girl. She was deprived of her identity as a princess. It was her own father who had snatched away all her joys and luxuries and left her to lead a miserable life. Satyavati expressed her grief ,

"I was born a princess. I am a king's daughter. Just like my twin brother who is now , I hear, the king of Matsya, the new kingdom carved out from Chedi. He roams across the country in his chariot, it's a silk white flag embossed with a shimmering fish flying aloft, while I sell fish and ferry people! Why was I denied my right?"(30-31)

Satyavati is "born and breathed in squalor"(98) and spent a "bleak childhood".(98) The place where Satyavati and her fisher folk live is just like a hell. The lanes are stinking. It is a locality of thatched huts where only stone-roof house is owned by her foster father Dashraj, the chieftain of fishermen. They are burdened by the stigma of low-caste. She receives humiliation on account of her dark skin complexion and nauseating body stench. No one except her father call her by the name Satyavati. Many call her Kali in a pejorative way. "Kali- an unimaginative reference to her dark skin, dark hair and dark eyes."(9) Others call her Matsyagandha, "the girl with the fish smell"(12). This nickname alludes to her repulsive stench which is an insult. The name represents the caste-conscious stigma attached to various manual labour occupations, such as fishing. Her body has an unpleasant fishy odour. That's why, every one tries to keep distance from her. People pass by her with their hateful noses covered. As Kané points out,

"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."(10-11)

Satyavati is portrayed as a helpless individual who is a victim of the structure that governs our society. She has to bear the curse of untouchability. Though she is educated and intelligent, she never receives respect and regard. She is treated as "a pariah, the lowest of the low."(11) The word pariah reflects her status as an outcast. Thus, she is the victim of triple jeopardy or triple oppression. She is marginalised and oppressed on the basis of colour, caste and gender. She faces discrimination because of being a female, a black and an untouchable. She is mocked by the king's men, who believe she is responsible for the robbery. She feels angry and frustrated about it. She knows they can throw her in jail, strip her naked and search her if they have enough proof to think she has stolen something.

A substantial chunk of Satyavati's character development is driven by the wants and objectives she has. Her path, on the other hand, is shaped by her desires for acceptance from others and a better form of living. She wants to empower herself socially and economically. Now she is no longer an innocent fisher girl but a worldly wise, practical and sexually assertive woman. As Kané mentions, " she had lost her innocence

to gain freedom.”(20) When rishi Parashar tries to seduce her, she intellectually encash the opportunity for her betterment. As Kané writes, “This was her opportunity. He could turn her unprivileged life into an unusual one.”(20) She asks the sage Parashara to grant her “eternal youth, a rare fragrance, unimpaired virginity”(28) in exchange of satisfying his sexual desire. In the article “Gender Discrimination and Quest of Female Identity in Kavita Kané’s The Fisher Queen Dynasty”(2021), Suchitra Rani Mahato remarks,

“Rishi Parashar acts as a catalyst who gives a new dimension to Satyavati’s life... 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.”(251)

Rishi Parashar grants her unattainable boons of intoxicating smell, intact virginity and eternal charm. He has transformed her fish smelling Matsyagandha into sweet smelling Yojanagandha whose fragrance reaches eight miles afar. As Rishi Parashar says to her, “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 whom you want.”(18) This shift in Satyavati’s body smell serves as a potent metaphor for her metamorphosis from an innocent girl into a wise lady who “had power and control over her life and love”.(27) Rishi Parashar has taught her that there is nothing wrong in embracing sexuality and fulfilling one’s dreams and desires. He encourages her not to be “bound by conventions or be tied down by others.”(19) He reminds her that she is not an ordinary girl but a princess “born to rule”.(19) His words adds fuel to the fire burning inside her. Now, she rediscovers herself. She finds herself “unrepentant and unapologetic about her deeds and her decisions”.(27) The episode of Rishi Parashar completely changes the path of her life. Her perspective changes as a result of the change in circumstances, and she grows more confident and passionate about her ambitions. She claims,

“I - not Fate or God- shall be responsible for my own happiness, my own future. I promise myself, I will not be the victim any more; nor will my child.”(31) Hence now, Satyavati emerges as a new Kali, “beautiful, bold and brazen”.(27) The repeated humiliation, pain and disdain she undergoes in her early life has made her so bitter and over ambitious that she is now ready to go on even unrighteous path to fulfill her desires. Her beauty and charm has become “her sharpest weapon to cleave and carve a better life for herself.”(27) She does not feel any shame in using her body as a tool to seduce men to attain what she wants. She is ready to be called unscrupulous but cannot afford to be “a forgotten casualty” as her mother is. She justifies, “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 .”(32)

She is exhausted with extreme poverty, deprivation and oppression. She wants to rise high socially and economically. She wants to empower herself. She is not ready to be governed by anyone instead craving to become a governing body. When the king expresses his desire to make love to her, she grabs the opportunity to become a queen as she murmurs to herself, “I could be a young queen to an old king... 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 is in hunt of a suitable catch i.e. a wealthy and powerful man. Her most awaited moment arrives, when she comes across Shantanu, the king of Hastinapur. When the king expresses his love for her, she takes advantage of the opportunity to become a queen. But her father Dashraj is not satisfied with her just being a queen. He wants her to be the grand matriarch of a great kingdom. He has compelled Devavrat, the son of king Shantanu to vow not to marry and to remain a celibate till death to secure the throne of Hastinapur for the sons and grandsons of Satyavati. She becomes the queen of Hastinapur after marrying king Shantanu.

People of Hastinapur hates Satyavati for decrowning Bishma. Kane says through Shantanu, "They see you as an intruder-usurper-who snatched his rights, his crown and his future. They hate you, Matsyagandha, and they will never forgive you". (112) They despise her on account of her marginalised background. Every body calls her queen Daseyi which means the daughter of a dasa or a slave. They are openly confronting her. Protest and demonstrations are started against her. As Kané writes, "...everybody started addressing her as Queen Daseyi, reminding her of who she was in the palace...The court was openly sneering at the new queen..."(129) Her thought of being a second wife haunted her inner psyche. Kane narrates, "A borrowed crown for a borrowed Queen, taunted her inner voice. A second queen, A second wife and An interloper" .(131) But she succeeds in gaining her subject's trust completely because of her sheer determination and acute intelligence. In course of time she makes her people accept her, "This girl will be the queen, the grant matriarch of this new dynasty that she will start! it will be her blood line as well from now on."

Her aspirations and wants have a big influence on Satyavati's personality development. She transforms from a lady who is preoccupied with her looks to a queen who actively participates in determining the direction that her kingdom will take. Satyavati's perseverance and toughness are demonstrated by her determination to accomplish her goals in the face of societal constraints and challenges.

Her low caste background has never prevented her from achieving her goal of becoming the queen of Hastinapur, instead it has helped her become a voice for the underprivileged groups of society. She intentionally used her position as Hastinapur's queen to include all the castes and classes of Hastinapur in government in order to foster a peaceful coexistence. She has reshaped not just her own life but also the lives of marginalised people of Hastinapur. Her administrative skills are eventually admired by all. The way she has expanded Hastinapur sometimes by threats and sometimes through making alliance is really praise worthy. She handled the political affairs even better than her male peers. As the author states,

"The world had gotten 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 the nobles both casting aspersions and accusations on her intentions and integrity, but she had eventually won them all over...She had made this palace the best palace the best in the country, and she was determined that it would remain the best."(190)

In “The Fisher Queen Dynasty”, Kané has beautifully explored various aspects of the character of Satyavati. Here, we gain a fresh understanding of this mythical character. She is embodied as a strong, independent woman who battles against marginalisation and claim her place as history’s most significant woman. She is a lady of immense courage and conviction. Her transformation from a simple fisher girl scorned and rejected for her dark skin and awful body odour to a stunning Madonna with an alluring body scent and ultimately becoming the queen of Hastinapur is really commendable. Quoting the words of Suchitra Rani Mahatao from article, “ Gender Discrimination and Quest of Female Identity in Kavita Kané’s the Fisher Queen Dynasty”, “Kané’s Fisher Queen Dynasty depicts very skill fully the growth and development of the life of Satyavati. 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 transformation from Kali to Satyavati, Matsyagandha to Yojanagandha, a fisher girl to a queen... 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.”(254)

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