

GENDER AND SOCIETY: SLAYING STEREOTYPES IN KAVITA KANE'S NOVELS 'SITA'S SISTER' AND 'LANKA'S PRINCESS'

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Abstract:

Gender roles and mythology have been an age-old part of our society and women being a segment of it, play an important role. The Indian society has been patriarchal in nature, giving men a social position higher than women. Similarly, the women characters in mythology too are often left unheard.

Keywords: *gender-roles, society, mythology, feminism, patriarchy*

Introduction:

Mythology plays a chief function in our lives even today. It is a catalyst utilised by many contemporary writers to instil in people the principles of the value-system our ancestors have fabricated. Mythology is perceived as patriarchal by most of its readership. Especially the female readership perceives it so, as the stories revolve mostly around the male protagonists. For instance, in the prodigious Indian epic, the 'Ramayana', Ram and Lakshman are portrayed as the flag bearers, while Sita has been portrayed to follow the 'dharma' of a wife subserviently.

Along with allocating women a position one level below men in general, Indian mythology has specifically marginalized the minor female characters of the epics. For example, in the 'Ramayana', Lakshman's wife, Urmila, has been rendered an aphonic role throughout the epic. No one has regarded her existence let alone considering her opinions in the Indian mythological epic. Likewise, the standpoint of the character of Surpanakha from the 'Ramayana' has never been taken into consideration. She has been portrayed as evil or malevolent throughout. The motive behind her behaviour should have been understood and in turn comprehended.

Like the ancient, obsolete and tarnished Indian moral standards that defined different social constructs for women and men to conform to, the gender roles depicted in the Indian mythological epics are still affixed to the Indian society. And even today, women are expected to abide by the same orthodox standards that have been put forth

by the ancestral rishi-munis of India in the name tradition and society. These so-called gender binary rules compel women to conform indirectly to the unsaid sexual regulations as well. As a consequence, to such long-standing misogynist and phallogocentric system, contemporary writers such as Kavita Kane, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amish Tripathi, etc. have started re-telling and re-visioning these epics from the female characters' viewpoint and feminist vantage point.

Kavita Kane, an Indo-Anglican writer, has portrayed the female minor characters who have always been doubly marginalized in the Indian mythological epics such as 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata' as the protagonists of her novels. Through her writing, the age-old credence of women being reliant entirely on men is shattered. She advocates that a woman can combat against anything and anyone for whatever she wants single-handedly.

Urmila- the defiant sister of Sita:

Kane is one of the contemporary writers to express her repulsion towards these conventional gender rules through her novels such as Sita's Sister, Lanka's Princess, many more. In Kavita Kane's novels, once seen as docile and subservient, the minor female characters breakthrough to become fierce women who have their own opinions and judgements. Through her novel Sita's Sister, the old belief of women being dependent entirely on men for everything is crushed. Kane states that a woman can fight her own battles solitarily.

Sita's Sister is Kavita Kane's second novel first published in 2014 written from the standpoint of Urmila, Sita's sister and Lakshman's wife. Urmila, since her childhood, is portrayed as a resolute child.

She was not going to accept defeat- Urmila's tiny, stubborn chin rose belligerently. (Kane, 2)

Urmila, as suggested in the novel, is level-headed and defies all the gender norms that are imbued especially on the girls since their childhood. Unlike her other sister Sita, who did all the womanly duties of performing pooja, etc., Urmila

is portrayed to enjoy painting which was predominantly a field of interest for men. Urmila can be perceived as a girl who would go beyond her confines for her sister, Sita, in contrast. This is made apparent in the novel when Urmila is in conversation with Shrutakirti about Sita when she hid in a place which was forbidden for them to enter. This is evident from

"Why would she hide there when we have been forbidden to go to that wing of the palace?" said Urmila uneasily knowing she would not hesitate to break any such rule. (Kane, 3)

As opposed to the gender norms of the society glued to women, and also Sita in the novel, of being slender, tall, "delicately framed" (Kane, 6), with thick and long hair, Kane has portrayed Urmila as "voluptuous Urmila. Urmila's fetching roundness blunted her height." (Kane, 7). Urmila is shown to have a quick temper as distinct to Sita who is a follower of the rules laid down by the society for women of being calm and subdued.

Urmila, since her childhood, is perceived of not displaying the stereotypical characteristic of gossiping which women supposedly possess. She, in fact, is observed reprimanding Mandavi for eavesdropping when the maids are chatting amongst themselves.

"How many times have I told you not to overhear maids gossip?" (Kane, 7).

Furthermore, after Sita and Ram, and Urmila and Lakshman have tied the knot, and Ram, Lakshman and Sita have left for exile, it was Urmila who aided Bharata to run the kingdom of Ayodhya. Yet again it was Urmila who laid out a helping hand for her family to cope with the demise of King Dashrath.

Besides helping her family in coping with such taxing situations, Urmila also exposed the wicked Manthara's scheme of sending Ram into exile. Unlike Sita's stand of going with her husband, Ram into the exile, Urmila opted to stay behind in the palace without her husband, Lakshman. She challenged the 'dharma' of a wife of following her husband like a shadow wherever he went.

Moreover, she raised questions over the 'dharma' or the duties of a man towards his wife and mother when Guru Kashyap tried to quash her voice.

"I ask again and again- does the man have no duties toward his wife and his mother? Why are the queens made to suffer the grief of parting from their sons?" (Kane, 221-222).

"Your old mothers who won't see you for another fourteen years, living on a slim sliver of hope every single day? Don't you have any duty, any compassion

toward them? If you could not keep the vows you made to your wives, why did you brothers marry? You may be the best of the princes, the perfect sons, the ideal brothers, probably the ideal kings too, but never the good husband!" (Kane, 222-223).

In the epilogue, it can be understood that Kane has criticized the gender norms that a man, and particularly a king, had to abide by, and how Urmila had always been an advocate of the rights of the women despite their class.

Urmila and Lakshman had two sons-Angad and Chitraketu- almost a year after a pregnant Sita was banished by Ram into the forest, a few months after their return to Ayodhya. Urmila remained Ram's most outspoken critic and could not bring herself to forgive Ram for choosing his people and his country over his wife-Sita, her sister. (Kane, 308)

Kane, through the character of Urmila in her novel *Sita's Sister* expresses her opinion against the gender norms prevalent in the society stuck to the men and especially women. She advocates feminism keeping in mind the fact that women and men are equal. She has portrayed her Urmila as a powerful, courageous and intellectual woman who has a broad mind as compared to the women of her times.

The coerced transformation from Meenakshi to Surpanakha:

Lanka's Princess is a novel where Kane dismisses the supposed standards for a woman that the society has enforced taking her for granted. This novel is about the princess of Lanka and Ravan's sister, initially named as Meenakshi for her beautiful and attractive eyes, and now called Surpanakha the one who is "as hard as nails" (Kane, xiii). According to the mythological epic the 'Ramayana', Surpanakha is perceived as a demoness. She is perceived as brazen, cruel, uncultured, unrefined and scheming. The question of what made Meenakshi become Surpanakha is answered by Kavita Kane in the novel.

Born as a royal breed, Meenakshi never was treated as one. Her birth disappointed her mother, Kaikesi, as she was a girl. Kaikesi is one of the primary factors for Meenakshi becoming Surpanakha. She being Meenakshi's mother looked down upon her. Kaikesi made her feel subjugated and as a result, Ravan too made her feel the same way. This can be made evident with Kaikesi's reaction to the news that a girl was born to her.

"It's a girl!" Kaikesi heard the words as the last wave of pain and relief. It was a daughter not a son, her heart

sank, her aspirations drowning in a flood of disappointment and easy tears. (Kane, 1).

She was made to realize that being a girl with a voice and an opinion is not accepted by the society. Since her birth, she was a victim of hegemony and patriarchy but she rose to power facing all these challenges and crossing the hurdles that came in her way. She stood for herself despite the fact that she had no-one to support her.

In *Lanka's Princess*, Kane demonstrates how women, time and again, are made to feel subordinate to men and are rejected, not only by men but also by women, from the character of Surpanakha. The novel also reveals the fact that women have to face such rejection and oppression not only from outside but also at home. The novel essentially revolves around the journey of Surpanakha; her life as a girl and her rebellion against the gender roles forced upon her.

Surpanakha was always judged against her brothers Ravan, Kumbhakaran and Vibhishan. She was always perceived as unattractive and despondent. The instance when Surpanakha scratches Ravan for killing her pet goat Maya, can be perceived as crushing of the gender norms of a girl having to tolerate with the injustice done to her and enduring calmness despite being offended and enraged internally.

Meenakshi slowly felt her throat going dry, feeling the heat of fury coiling slowly inside her. (Kane, 7).

"Why can you not behave like a girl? Always fighting and squabbling, hitting boys and throwing stones and scratching the eyes out of anyone who provokes you. Surpanakha, that's the name for you, you monster!" (Kane, 9).

Here it can be observed that the gender stereotype was a part of these myths. It can also be observed that Kane, through the character of Surpanakha who is a short-tempered girl, slays the gender norm of women to be poised and composed, set by the society. Meenakshi was renamed as Surpanakha by Ravan, as observed in the given quotation given above, because she was stubborn, out right and wasn't as beautiful as girls were expected to be and would not tolerate any injustice done to her.

Vibhishan, in the novel, is portrayed as the weaker siblings out of all. Being a boy, he was expected to defend himself without anyone being there to help him. When Surpanakha defends Vibhishan, she was condemned for helping him out due to the belief that a boy could take care of himself.

These are the rules or the so-called "gender

norms" that are imbued and imposed on children by the society irrespective of their gender that establish the binary differences between the two sexes which is rightly depicted in Kavita Kane's novel *Lanka's Princess*. It is imposed on Surpanakha to live her life as an ideal woman of the society would. Since she failed to do so, she is banished from the society.

Simone de Beauvoir has rightly said that an individual is not born as a woman but is made one by the imposition of gender norms. This thought is highlighted by Kane in this novel. If Surpanakha would not have been ill-treated, she would have become a like any other child. Due to the oppression and ill-treatment, she had to take a stance for standing for herself and raising the voice against the bias. Similarly, many people around her tried to change Surpanakha to become the ideal woman who would be accepted by the society. But she chose to rather be called a monster than an ideal woman who lived under the oppression of the society.

Once recognized as Meenakshi, Surpanakha is named so until she finds love. She falls in love with Vidyujiva and her love too is reciprocated by him. He loves her for who she is, and Surpanakha becomes his Meenu. After this incident, a different shade of Surpanakha does not go unobserved. But this is until she finds out about the honour killing of her husband Vidyujiva by her brothers. She transforms back to being Surpanakha after a brief period of being Meenu and avenges the honour killing of her husband, scheming against Ravan.

Surpanakha is also viewed rebelling against the gender norms when she tried to seduce Lakshman. Though her nose is severed, she at least expresses her sexual desires. She was ridiculed for doing so by the society but that was her way of defying the societal or gender norms.

Meenakshi, Surpanakha or Meenu- she is perceived as three different hues of the same woman; a woman who loved with all her heart and did whatever she could for her love. And the woman who rebelled against the orthodox gender norms and fought against all odds to make her voice heard.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, it is mythology that has an influence of the society. The norms that are laid down as a foundation of the society too have a great impact of mythology on them. Kavita Kane's keenness is more towards re-visioning the mythological texts and especially the doubly

marginalized characters like Urmila and Surpanakha, which eliminates the aponia of the minor female characters from the mythological texts.

Hence, the re-telling and re-visioning of these mythological epics from time to time is important due to the fact that they continue to influence and touch the hearts of the younger and newer generations of the society giving them fresher perspectives on mythology and gender and society.

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