

## VOICING THE VOICELESS: WOMEN INHABITING KAVITA KANE'S MYTHOLOGICAL FICTION

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**Abstract:**

*Kavita Kane has emerged like a beacon for the voiceless characters of the Indian Epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. Her works have helped research scholars and layman readers alike to focus on the marginalised women of the epics and read them as independent characters. This paper focuses on two of Kane's most celebrated works, Sita's Sister and The Fisher Queen's Dynasty as representative fiction texts for Ramayana and Mahabharata. The paper endeavours to explore Kane's interpretation and depiction of our Epic heroines and to contextualize them in the contemporary setting.*

**Keywords:** Indian Mythological Fiction, Marginalised, Voiceless, Women, Identity.

Indian mythology has gained notoriety as being unjust to its women characters. Valmiki's Ramayana glorifies a submissive and docile Sita, without exploring many of the traits that make her a woman. Sita's character is underwhelming at best, only a perfect foil to Ram. She never independently exists, except for her final denial of the *Agnipariksha*. The characters of women have often been tooled in order to guide women of posterity. Sita is made in the androcentric vision of an ideal woman and as such is flawless to a fault. Her depiction is the blue print of how an ideal woman should be according to the Indian society. However, the Sita of Kane's fiction work comes across as an independent, rebellious and feminist woman. She has thoughts of her own as well as a clear idea of right and wrong. Kane explores Sita and fleshes her out much better than Rishi Valmiki ever did. Sita suddenly becomes a wholesome woman, who knows her heart as well as her mind. She is aware of her sacrifice, she knows where her loyalties lie and yet, she is in possession of uncompromising dignity. She rebels, in no subtle tones, against her unjust abandonment and refuses to go through a second *Agnipariksha*. Kane's Sita comes into her own, and rises from the ashes of her own misfortune, much like a phoenix. In the end, she becomes the master of her fate, refusing to be led like cattle by her husband or society. Valmiki's Ramayana portrays Sita as being

nothing more than a devoted, docile wife. She is a woman who devotedly follows her husband in his exile and meekly accepts the abandonment he bestows upon her afterwards. She is rarely shown interacting with her sisters, with whom she shared a long childhood. In Kane's work, Sita is as much a wife as a sister. She deeply cares for Urmila and acknowledges her sacrifice by saying "I bow to you, sister, for your *vanvaas*, your exile here in the palace shall be way harder than mine in the forest." Sita realises the misfortune that has befallen Urmila and her other sisters. She does not merely follow her husband into exile but chooses it because of the love she bears him. Urmila is another marginalised character from the Ramayana. Rishi Valmiki attributes her with only a three lined dialogue and then she is lost in the pages of that voluminous epic. Urmila often is only the woman that was abandoned by Lakshman. She is a wife and a sister and nothing more. Kane, very aptly, names her novel *Sita's Sister*. Kane deliberately named her novel such, as a scathing commentary on how little is known about Urmila or her true identity. Urmila's identity is reduced to being the sister of a great woman, a woman who sacrifices everything for the love of her husband. Posterity doesn't even know who Urmila was. Generations of Hindu children have been raised on stories from the Ramayana but only a handful are aware of Urmila, and even fewer ask questions about her. What happened to her after Ram, Lakshman and Sita went into exile? How did she survive 14 years without her husband? What did she do? The epic Ramayana falls woefully short of doing any justice to these questions, it doesn't even attempt to answer them. Urmila is forgotten the moment Lakshman and Sita step out of the palace, the two people to whom her identity is intricately adhered. Kane explores Urmila and gives her character many facets. Kane's Urmila is not just a wife or a sister, but a daughter, a daughter in law, an advisor to her people. She is the one who holds the *Raghukul* fort together and stops it from crumbling to pieces in the absence of the men of the house. The Urmila of *Sita's Sister* is fierce, opinionated and fights for what she believes in. She loves her husband and understands his love

for Ram. She is strong to let him go. She is the *Sannyasin* in the true sense of the word. Sita at least has her husband with her but Urmila sustains for 14 years on the loving memory of her husband. Urmila is the extremely modest, unsung heroine of Kane's work. In the contemporary sense, she is an ideal woman: a woman who is independent, loving, nurturing, and fierce. Urmila's abandonment becomes her strength rather than her downfall. In Bhargavaram Warekar's *Bhoomikanya Sita*, he explores Urmila's character deeply, giving her a purpose and identity. This play, however, turned out to be too radical and was never staged. Kane acers herself in each concurrent work with her portrayal of the voiceless women of the epics. These women have been compartmentalised into little squares by society and assigned gender roles and attributes. Thus, fierce women like Draupadi, ambitious women like Satyawati or Kaikeyi are looked upon with condescension. They are the fall women whom society wants to make an example out of. Children are often told idolising stories of Sita, Kausalya and Gandhari but seldom are Draupadi or Satyawati idolised. Satyawati is another misunderstood woman of the epic tale of Mahabharata. She is termed ambitious, vicious and merciless. Vyasa portrays Satyawati as the woman one must run away from. If Sita is the ideal role model, Satyawati is the vamp a woman must never aspire to become. Vyasa gives Draupadi some redemptive qualities but his Satyawati is bereft of such blessings. In the Vyasa Mahabharata, Satyawati is the woman who marries for power and prestige and then robs the rightful heir, Bhishma of his birth right. The reader of these epic tales never pauses to ponder whether women truly possessed such power during the male dominated times. Women were mere pawns in political games, where the real power resided with men. Satyawati is blamed to be the catalyst of the downfall of the Kuru clan, as she maligns the bloodline with her poor pedigree. Kavita Kane, in her novel *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, explores Satyawati on as many planes as possible, redeeming her in the eyes of the reader. Satyawati is an impoverished young girl who ceases the opportunity of marrying a

much older King and securing for her progeny a throne coveted by many. In this she is loathed by kingdom and kin. Kane explores her feelings for her husband, King Shantanu, baring Satyawati's soul to its rawest form. Kane's portrayal of Satyawati tugs at the readers' heart as she unravels to be a real woman inhabiting a real world instead of the enigma Vyasa made her out to be. Gender and society have always existed as foils to one another, where the female gender has been made an example out of too frequently. Kane peels off layers of Satyawati's psyche exposing her to the reader. Satyawati acknowledges her fears, her mistakes and her aspirations many times during the events of the fiction work. *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* is a two-fold journey, one of the reader unravelling Satyawati and one of Satyawati discovering herself. Her dynamic with Bhishma, the mature relationship that they share, and her eventual rise in the eyes of the Kuru are worth exploring. She is a fierce, ambitious woman misunderstood by many on account of societal norms of those times. The male-centric society could not allow her to become a heroine and as such she was never fully explored in Vyasa's Mahabharata.

Indian writers in English have been heralds of new sites of exploration and discovery in the oeuvre of literature. Kavita Kane has forged her way forward as a woman writer giving voice and perspective to women characters wronged by society. Sita, Urmila and Satyawati have inhabited the pages of Kane's masterpieces, breathing a new life in the contemporary readings of Indian Epics through Indian Mythological Fiction.

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