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**Rewriting the Literary Canon: An Analysis of Select Retellings of Kavita Kane**

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**Abstract**

*This paper discusses the reconstruction of myths through rewriting by Kavita Kane, an Indian author, popular for her rewritings of Indian myths from the women's perspective. The writer, in her fiction, focuses on those female characters who, despite playing very significant roles in the narrative, are either least visible or portrayed from a male perspective. Kane has given a new perspective and dimension to the myths by bringing such characters from the periphery to the centre. This paper focuses on Kane's two retellings- Sita's Sister (2014) and Menka's Choice (2015) and argues that these retellings have broadened the boundaries not only of the narratives but also of the ideological framework of the reader whether female or male. Also, such portrayal has created an alternative feminine narrative by representing the lesser known women of the historical world.*

**Key Words:** Retelling, myths, alternative narrative, agency

“No society can exist without myth as it creates notions of right and wrong, good and bad, heaven and hell, rights and duties” (Pattanaik, Devdutt) Mythologies, in Bharat, are taken to be one of the biggest sources of information, knowledge and understanding of human culture and nature. They mirror, direct and guide the human race and set the benchmarks for assessing human characters and actions. They become the biggest source of constructing ideologies. Such significant treatise, when got observed closely by female thinkers, was found lopsided to a great extent. It was noticed that the discourse of mythology generally

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revolved around men; detailing their life, their actions, their thoughts, their decisions, their sacrifices etc. Many of these stories glorified and idolized men whereas women got lesser space and least voice and were mostly relegated to the roles of submissive daughters, wives or mothers or of victims and mute observers. Such a portrayal indirectly establishes them physically and emotionally weak.

Upset by this absence or insignificant female portrayals, many postmodern feminist writers are re-reading this male centric/dominated literature from women's perspective and are venturing to represent various underrepresented/misrepresented women. Their writings tend to provide female view of the world, voice their thoughts and portray their actions in detail. Such an attempt may be taken as the rewriting of the literary canon. This paper discusses the reconstruction of myths through rewriting by Kavita Kane. She is an Indian author and is popular for her rewritings of Indian myths from the women's perspective. The writer, in her fiction, focusses on those female characters who, despite playing very significant roles in the narrative, are either least visible or portrayed from a male perspective. Kane has given a new perspective and dimension to the myths by bringing the characters like Urmila, Surpanakha, Menaka, and Satyavati from the periphery to the centre. This paper focuses on Kane's two retellings- *Sita's Sister* (2014) and *Menka's Choice* (2015) and argues that these retellings have broadened the boundaries not only of the narratives but also of the ideological framework of the reader whether female or male. Also, such portrayal has created an alternative feminine narrative by representing the lesser known women of the historical world.

These novels, which delve into the lives of women from Bhartiya mythology who are often overshadowed or relegated to supporting roles, offer a fresh perspective and challenge traditional narratives. Kane in an interview to R. Krithika for *The Hindu* states, "Minor characters sometimes give you an alternative perspective to mythological stories".<sup>1</sup>

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Stressing upon the significance of mythology she says:

If myths reflect the socio-cultural ethos of earlier times, they can also be used to contemporize 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) (Kane, Kavita. "Through the Mythical Lens." Interview by R. Krithika. The Hindu 5th March 2020)

Sita's Sister is the story of Laxman's wife Urmila who is portrayed as a minor character in the famous epic Ramayana and receives hardly any mention. Though her sister Sita is present throughout the narrative, Urmila, the possessor of great beauty and a very strong character, despite her very important role is not given voice in the epic. The novel Sita's Sister gives Urmila a chance to share her emotions, desires and perspective. Frances Babbage in her work In Revisioning Myth: Modern and Contemporary Drama by Women says, "Myths and practices of rewriting can be means of revealing shared attitudes and experience" ( Babbage, Frances. In Revisioning Myth: Modern and Contemporary Drama by Women. New York: Manchester UP, 2011).

Urmila, the young bride, is not given a chance to accompany her husband Laxman to the forest like her sister Sita and is left behind in the palace by her husband who leaves Ayodhya with his brother Ram for long fourteen years. Her anguish is unknown to the world because no mention is made in the epic about her life. The narrator chooses to remain silent on her emotions, views, perspective and actions. Her life behind in the palace is completely overshadowed by the mention of the activities of her sister Sita, her husband Laxman and her brother in law Ram. Kane, observing this fact, tries to imagine Urmila's thoughts, emotions, actions and reactions as a woman and attempts a detailed portrayal of these in her novel Sita's Sister. Kane finds Urmila an extraordinary character who is not governed by emotions but by intellect and wisdom and, therefore, accepts to stay back, considering it her duty towards her husband. She could also have insisted on to accompany her husband to the forest but like a

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true friend and mate she preferred living a lonely anguished life instead of hampering her husband's duties towards his elder brother.

Also, in the novel, she is shown using offensive words to hurt Laxman at the time of his departure, "You cannot stay back for me because your brother is more precious than your wife. You are not like your father to listen to his wife, are you?" (147). This is a deliberate act on her part to make it easy for him to leave her. She knew that her impolite words would facilitate his decision to leave the palace and her. Urmila behaved rudely only to make him furious and detest her during their long separation of the coming fourteen years. This act of Urmila establishes her divine and selfless love for her husband. Laxman understands her emotional state and the reason for her harsh words and assures her of his faith in her, "It's the memory of our full, sustained love which will never make us feel alone or lonely" (157). When Ram feels sad for taking Lakshman with him she says, "It's for a higher calling, a nobler mission, you are taking my husband. He will always be there for you" (154). Her devotion for her husband and her family is so deep that she undertakes it as her duty to support them strongly in this difficult time.

However, she does not hesitate to talk about rights and duties and boldly asserts in front of all the Gurus in the room, "Today in this room, we have talked about all sorts of Dharma – of the father and the sons, of the kings and princess, of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya – even of the wife for her husband. But is there no Dharma of the husband for his wife? No Dharma of the son for his mother? Is it always about the father, sons and brothers?" (219)

But at the same time she leaves no stone unturned in fulfilling her duties as a daughter in law of the family and shines like a bright gem. With full devotion she takes care of everyone, though herself suffering from the pangs of separation. Kane portrays Urmila as a great manager and visionary. In the palace Urmila is always alert towards her duties and deals with the affairs of the kingdom very wisely and courageously. She puts all her efforts to establish peace in the palace and therefore is vigil and keeps a watch on Manthara to avoid any negative happening. She even refuses to go with Bharat when he leaves Ayodhya to meet

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Ram in the forest. But the mother-in-law Sumitra who understands her sacrifice and dutifulness, convinces her to go with the troop to meet Ram and Lakshman. In the forest Urmila keeps her emotions in check and exhibits her positivity by saying to her husband that she is proud of him and encourages him with full conviction to fulfill his duty.

Kane imagines her not only as a dutiful wife and daughter in law but also as a great scholar. This glorious aspect of her personality is highlighted when her father Janak invites her to the philosophical conference, the prestigious Brahman yagna – which he hosted every year. She has been requested to attend the symposium to participate in it as an acclaimed scholar. She accepts the invite and there, at the conference, is shown present amongst the brilliant minds with great humbleness and serenity.

Hence, the readers, through Kane's efforts meet a wonderful character who was yet unknown to them despite her presence in the great epic Ramayana.

Another powerful personality, discovered by Kane, is apsara Menka, a character from the Mahabharata, an ancient Indian epic. Menka, who is considered a divine being, is often portrayed as a seductress who uses her beauty to distract and digress great men. She doesn't seem to be having any emotional side of her personality. However, Kane's novel, *Menka's Choice*, presents her as someone who possesses both a brain and a heart. A person who struggles with the circumstances in her life, faces challenges, takes her decisions and is ready to accept the repercussions. Kane offers insight into Menka's psyche and presents the entire narrative from her perspective. Menka has been represented not as a tool in the hands of patriarchy that generally looks at the females merely as an object of desire but as an enlightened character who understands her position and agency. By presenting Menka's perspective, Kane challenges the traditional narrative that objectifies her and conceals her multifaceted personality.

The traditional narratives depict apsaras as mere enchanting puppets who are made to dance to others' tunes, as and when required and have no life, desire or will of their own. But Kane's apsara Menka is not only an object of male gaze and desires but also a subject who has her

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own gaze and desires. As the narrative proceeds, the readers witness an extraordinary beauty who enchants not only physically but also intellectually and emotionally. She is constantly aware of her gender, her role and her position but has guts to exercise her rights to fulfill her desires. She keeps her autonomy and agency over her decisions and questions the tasks and roles assigned to her by the authority. The unreasonable social restraints that do not allow her a life of her own are unacceptable to her. Menaka rejects the biased and unsympathetic norms by being determined to shape her life and materialize her dreams. She asserts her rights by not accepting a loveless life imposed upon apsaras and gandharvas as per the rules of the heaven and challenges the authoritative norms by marrying a gandhava Vishwvasu. She even got pregnant and thus exhibited her motherly instincts which might seem to be unnatural for a stereotypical emotionless seductress as she had always been portrayed. Kane imagines her as a complex person with variety of emotions in addition to the traditional seduction and deceit.

Hence, Menaka, whose traditional role is to act according to the dictates of male characters, succeeds in asserting her desires by using her agency.

When Indra gets to know about her move, he tries to snatch her back from Vishwvasu as if she is Indra's property. Unmindful of her emotions, Indra takes Vasu as a challenge to his authority and in the power struggle between them Menaka was taken like a prize to be won. She knew that Indra was fighting not for her but for what she represented. A property that can not be claimed by someone else. Indra could never tolerate Vasu becoming more popular than him in his state i.e. Indralok. And, therefore, uses all his might to defeat him. Menaka furiously retorted to this act of Indra:

You have always used sex as a weapon through us Apsaras. Call it temptation, or enticement, but it was always consensual sex; we seduced, we did not force anyone against their wishes. If there was force, it was you who used it on us, ordered us, victimized us in the name of our heavenly duty. But what you did today was not

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exploitation but dishonouring and denigrating the very act by using it as a tool to assault someone's character. You violated Vasu. And his reputation! (Kane 74)

This act of Indra ruins not only Vasu's life, but also that of Menaka and their daughter Pramadvara. Menaka is dejected and helpless. But, she doesn't lose control over her intellect and later on, when asked by Indra to seduce Vishwamitra, the great sage, she accepts the assignment that seemed to her providing with an opportunity to escape heaven which has become hell for her. History blames Menaka for seducing Vishwamitra and digressing him from his aim but actually Indra is the culprit who being afraid of the sage's power uses Menaka as a tool to divert his attention as he knows that only she is capable of attracting him. Menaka, on the other hand, has been depicted by Kane, as the one who finally decides to give up her blissful family life with the sage and their daughter Shakuntala because of her realization of her role in distracting the sage from his aim of becoming a Brahmarishi. Her charming presence had made him forget his duty towards himself and the humanity at large. Menaka realized that unknowingly she had become the cause of success of Indra's plans. Whatever she did was just to fulfill her innocent and natural wish to live a happy family life which was once denied to her and which she could attain in the company of Vishwamitra. But when she realizes how important it is for Vishwamitra to become a Brahmarishi she sacrifices her own happiness and dreams. She understood his potential and didn't want to be the cause for his deterioration and deprivation of the status that he actually deserved.

If it was the possible reason for Menka's leaving her married life, indeed the readers would have remained deprived of an astonishing truth of a great personality had Kane not thought of retelling the story from her perspective. History, indeed, now seems to be incomplete without different perspectives.

Kane's choice of the title Menka's Choice itself indicates Menaka's agency, her ability to shape her life and identity. She challenges the social norms that bind her in a stereotypical

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role and makes choices of getting married, being pregnant, defying the authority openly, finding chance of another blissful life and then sacrificing her happiness and her maternal desires for the greater good. This is upto the reader to assess her choices as right or wrong but her choices prove her clarity, conviction and courage. She proves herself much more than a beautiful seductress as she has been established by the traditional narratives.

Thus, Kane's retellings offer an entirely different perspective. She visualizes the underrepresented/misrepresented female characters not as weak and passive spectators or victims but as fearless active agents who possess intellectual prowess and act as per their understanding of their roles and choices and not by the dictates of any external agency. The retellings also prove that the selective or one sided representation, whether intentional or unintentional, overshadow some major characters. It may also villainize or glorify some characters who don't deserve such tags, and many a times, women become victim of such underrepresentation/ misrepresentation.

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