

MYTHICAL VAMPS: WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN REVISIONIST MYTHOLOGY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KAVITA KANE'S FICTION

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Abstract

The constant critical analysis over the various characters thronging the Indian myths gains significance in understanding the impact the myths have on the Indian society. It can safely be said that Indian myths form the warp and woof of the cultural fabric. The matter of ethics and culture has hailed some characters to be the personification of divinity while others are receded to demarcate the genre of pure evil. This branding however, has undergone considerable changes over the years and especially in the twenty first century where the rise of revisionist mythological fiction has increased deviant outlooks towards these characters. The authors of these deviant mythological tales, represent the voice of the characters forever subdued, thus living up to the post-modern multiplicity of the times. The voice of the negatively branded female has been attempted a study in this paper. The fact that these characters that had been pushed to occupy the margins, might not be as tainted beings as eternally depicted is a fact focused upon by contemporary revisionist mythological writers. This paper primarily deals with the emergence of the female voice in these contemporary mythological tales with special reference to the works of Kavita Kane, where the myths, seen through the gaze of a female protagonist shed ample light on its signification in the domain of re-visioning these characters to allow for a greater tolerance and understanding of the variable human truth.

Keywords: Subaltern, revisionist mythology, Indian mythology, female voice.

The modes that are often employed to express the individual opinion nowadays have undergone proliferation in multitudinal variants. The qualities of being aptly expressive, pertaining to the individual has come to occupy the supreme position in the judgment of such works. Therefore, no longer is water tight compartmentalization of subjects hailed. The age of digression into various genres have given rise to the culture of what is often derogatorily called adulteration. However, on a closer study into the forms of these permutations and combinations that take place in various domains it becomes apparent that one supreme benefit of the cross subject explorations has opened up unforeseen avenues of human thought whose depth and direction have started to baffle the intelligentsia for quite some time now. Coming out of the clutches of its puritanically preserved cloistered existence Indian

mythological tales have become a hot bed of such cultural explorations. The warp and woof of the right and wrong, the dharma and adharma of these tales have finally undergone the rot that had been clawing at its' over wrought base for some time now. These weary threads have led to the birth of a renewed genre of revisionist myth making that has dared to fathom the importance of the individuality that should have openly dominated the cultural quotient way back in the past as is guaranteed by the self entitled preservers of Indian culture. Even though varieties of the mainstream myths had always existed in the Indian subcontinent, the worth of the written word had always tilted the mark in favor of the mainstream versions of these myths resulting in the subaltern status being bestowed upon the variants. With the progressive writers re-writing these age old tales the imminence of a cultural alteration benefitting the erstwhile subalterns have come to be occupy a significant position.

It is worth mentioning that even though the writers of these renewed myths today produce the unabashed representation of numerous thoughts for example the *Shiva Trilogy* by the very popular Amish Tripathi who tries his hand at logically establishing the conditions of existence in the primordial cultural milieu that might have made allowance for the existence of the Hindu pantheon of gods. Similarly, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Pratibha Ray, Kavita Kane and their likes speak from the position of the women protagonists in their works and in doing so provide for possibilities of further understanding them. It is important to note that the classically accepted tales that are considered to have been sourced from Ved Vyas and Valmiki respectively as well as the re-tellings of the same, till the modern times have hardly come to us through the voice of the women therein. The women characters generally serve as the objects free to be interpreted from the man's point of view in terms of their conduct in a man's world, therefore retaining their subaltern status in society as well as in these myths which in turn influence Indian society. The writings of the above mentioned authors are significant considering the first allowance to speak that these characters receive. Therefore, it at once becomes clear that the revisionist myth making becomes a process of allowance of speech to the subalternized women characters. The characters therefore become living, breathing realities who often address concerns that have till date been dealt according to the demands of their representation by the male wordings, as Adrienne Rich has famously noted while defining the act of Re-visionism: "Re-vision- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival."(18)

The Indian woman of today, when she substitutes herself in place of the character she writes speaks the tongue of herself through the character. This might be considered an understandable phenomenon because by dint of the fact that the knowledge of the tales has become ingrained in the collective consciousness of the population, their malleability is highly tinted by the Individuals in whose minds these twist and turn to create individual interpretations. The politics of this representation is however, far reaching. The fact that

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her *The Palace of Illusions* talks about Draupadi is understandable; Draupadi is the apt subject of a lot of contention when it came to the understanding of dharma and adharma in the myths. Similarly *Yagnaseni* comes out as a rendition of the same character albeit in a significantly different way. Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya* on the other hand is an altogether separate handling of the same saga. What is important in all these endeavors is the voice of the subaltern that seems to have gained some significance and audience even in the guise of fictional re-renderings. It is needless to say that the popularity of these revisionist myths is far exceeding the sale of regular fictional material on medieval romance and teenage love stories. The impact on culture that these myths had had since times immemorial is evident in the works of various literary critics who have been vocal in their understanding of the phenomenon. Much like the classical myths that shape the occidental cultural scene, it is no secret that the orient considers its myths to be supremely important, especially in its forever ailing association with the predominant religion of the Indian subcontinent. Therefore it follows that the Indian myths are inextricably linked with the cultural gradient of the country. This invariably leads to undue importance being added to its characters and in the course of time the majorly male dominated mythological scenario aids in the subalternization of the women folk who are to lead the lives of docile heroines of the mythological tales to accrue any amount of respect that their sex might be allowed to have. In this scenario the recent spate of these revisionist mythological renditions become of primary importance as tools for voicing the repressed while at the same time allowing individuality to rear its head. Pratibha Ray's Draupadi is often found to be the docile adherer who simply has a voice, which is considered to be beneficial in forming the literary foil against Sita who is quite bereft of a voice. On the other hand Divakaruni's Draupadi, is a versatile woman of strength who comes with human frailties which fits the providential scheme of things:

While dharma figures occasionally in Divakaruni's version, as retold by Draupadi the story becomes about the emotions that make duty so difficult : anger, resentment, and suppressed desire dominate her life. The first two of these themes are present in the original Draupadi, but in *Palace* the inevitable Brahmana dharma lectures have (not surprisingly) disappeared. Divakaruni's Draupadi also develops a concern for the role of women in Hindu society and for the underprivileged (for example Ekalavya), which though they are not uniquely modern ideas, in the words of her heroine sound distinctly contemporary. (Larson-Harris 333)

Kavita Kane on the other hand takes up an altogether separate challenge, unlike the sparse work of the other two she seems to have worked out a detailed scheme for making the best out of the Indian revisionist canon. Her narratives are dominated by the otherwise fringe characters with well known plots guiding their lives. While Sita and Draupadi are often the well known demi-gods, Sita being the divine consort and Ram being the God incarnate,

Draupadi becomes the friend of God which by default entails a number of complications arising when it comes to the meting out the judgement of right and wrong with respect to their actions- a phenomenon that is criticized rightly by Ram Manohar Lohia; explicating whose view point Kumkum Yadav claims:

Lohia humanized the mythical character; no argument in his discussion was aimed at thrusting divinity upon her. Lohia also insisted that no personality, howsoever enigmatic, was to be accepted and venerated as a perfect and unquestionable ideal.(110)

Kane has beautifully started her project with *Karna's Wife: The Outcasts Queen*, the wife of the most tragic hero in Mahabharata, is a hardly known character. Kane's trajectory attains velocity in terms of narrative and characterization as Urmila in *Sita's Sister* becomes a far more logic powered erudite orator, whose speaks for the women who didn't follow their husbands to exile. In *Sita's Sister* Kane makes sure that the characters thronging the novel have the essential human tinge, thus no one is painted in hues of evil or sheer goodness but rather in a mixed tinge of humanizing grey. Sita in her husbandly devotion had forgotten to speak for her sister who is also the wife of Lakshman to accompany them to the exile, thus inflicting upon Urmila an exile affected by separation from her husband. In doing so Sita essentially becomes a selfish erring human. In the similar manner the wrong done towards her and the illogical decision of Rama in adhering to his father's commands in order to prove himself a worthy son is sincerely brought to light. *Menaka's Choice* becomes far more indulgent in voicing the womanly concerns as the oppression of the apsara in the land of perfection- heaven is highlighted. It becomes a raging satire on the negative impacts of orthodox thought processes on Indian society. The right to ones passions is talked for, making it impossible to think of the mythological tale between Viswamitra and Menaka as a mere fairytale and banishing Menaka's image as a soulless courtesan who serves the vile Indra. This along with a sub plot that emerges in the narrative in the form of the enterprise of the Kshatriya king Kaushik to become the Maharshi Viswamitra it develops a brilliant exercise in forming the co-dependence of the individual plot lines that bring to light the subtle motif of the novel which is the awakening of the subaltern and the shattering of their ranks. Even though Viswamitra is allowed finally to gain transcendence and escalate ranks to the coveted title of Maharshi, the possibility of Indra's courtesan to achieve a life of her own bereft of the controlling agency of heaven is rendered quite impossible. In the process indicating how the Hindu heaven is also an upholder of the systemic hierarchy that pervades the mortal earth. It is thus an exercise in syllogism where it at once gets evident that when the heavenly ideal of ours portrays such fallacy in being the ideal land of happiness, achieving such an ideal in human society in actuality can only be dreamt of. Thus speaking it becomes a necessity to ponder upon the mythological examples of perfection that are preached and which have come to occupy an immense part of the Indian subconscious in order to understand the deeply ingrained philosophies that go in the retention of the element of the subaltern amidst us. It is

astonishing to find that in the kingdom of plenty an event as abominable as rape is committed. Rambha the courtesan is raped by Ravan, thereby taking the imperfection of our heaven to an altogether different level. It becomes exceedingly important to thus locate the strands that go in the construction of a set up in the Indian society which has subalternity embedded imperceptibly in our hailed myths.

The use of the marginal characters from our epics might be considered an exceptional idea by Kane due to two reasons in particular. The first being that these characters as the mouth piece of themselves seem to be establishing much more of their circumstantial truths which while we as readers come across seem to make much more sense and brings to our perspective a plethora of elements that are considerable in their significance. Furthermore, the fact that the primary characters have been the subject of enough critical analysis till now along with the sensitivity of the sentiments they arouse among the Indian population makes putting them into proper perspective no less than a literary jeopardy. Yadav's commentary on Lohia once again provides clarity to the concept:

Lohia was not unduly concerned about the historical authenticity of mythical tales. Writing about Draupadi and Savitri in his famous essay "Draupadi or Savitri" he said, "It is very much possible that these two women are imagined. There is also the possibility that they did exist in reality."

The areas that required weeding and overhauling were the social and the cultural. Lohia, in his attempt to find a more permanent way out of the age-old bias against women in Indian society, took the debate to the mythological terrain, within which countless behavioral and moral touchstones had been created. (110)

Finally in the post-modern society in the acceptable absence of the central and thus the marginal, has cast us into the pitcher of a holistic existence. Therefore in the domain of mythology the importance of the previously marginal is no less and therefore, Kane's endeavor might be considered as a weapon in taking the Indian readership to a much more progressive front of applied post-modernity in the field of literature. The later work of Kane that deals with Surpanakha in *Lanka's Princess* is another engrossing read as the well known demoness undergoes laudable deconstruction under the able hands of the prolific writer. The atrocious upbringing of the girl child in a family of overtly ambitious brothers and a forever conflict prone set of parents is represented holding the strands of the accepted plot of the mainstream mythological tale. The possibilities of the plot line is explored by the writer and in so doing, she brilliantly portrays what might have been always present under the naked eye but remained unseen, the fact that - The subalterns are not born but made. The beauty of Meenakshi had been demolished by the baleful name of Surpanakha. Being blamed for engaging in self defense seems to be the abhorable demonic action but the actual offence goes unnoticed. While Ravan, the all powerful elder brother treacherously snatches away the one true love of Menakshi's life goes totally uncriticised under the guise of a well wrought

conspiracy, Meenakshi in herself imposed exile while giving vent to her passions, becomes the object of ever increasing consternation. To explicate this further Kane's words seem to be the best instrument:

Sita bit her lip. She lost her poise and looked uneasily at Surpanakha. She had no words of defence. How could she explain to Surpanakha that in the world she lived, there was a deep suspicion of women's power and desirability flaunted so openly and when unchecked by male control. (Kane LP 240)

Kane in each of her novels makes advancement towards a specific element that has remained oppressed in the act of methodical suppression of women. In *Lanka's Princess* the object of desire gets to be on the spotlight. The wrongfulness of the mutilation of Surpanakha by the divine duo has been distinct to the perceptive eyes since a long time, but the cultural baggage of siding with the spotless good seems to take the upper hand always and subalternization is thereby inflicted.

Kavita Kane's work has thus become a flag bearer in the genre of Indian revisionist mythology. The preceding list of authors who had marked the initiation into this territory definitely has an immense role to play in situating Indian mythological revisionism in the larger context of the revisionist literature globally. However, systematic approach to this genre with the ulterior aim of demystifying the mythological roots for attempting at a cultural subversion has been taken up recently by Kavita Kane with what might appear as a feminist take on the enterprise. The author brings all the characters on a very human plane before establishing the motive of her enterprise to not just giving these characters a humanitarian appeal but at the same time making their dilemmas and conflicts almost tangible in representation. She paves the path for not banishing them from the human pavilion but bringing them in the world of flesh and blood, as people very liable to err in order to facilitate their fervent voices to be heard and their status' in the plot of stories reexamined to finally have them established as beings at par with men folk. This methodically structured argument is skillfully conveyed so that, they do not suffer unreal expectations due to their divine status or become the picture of the ideal that mark the dimensions of oppression of the female subaltern. Mythological fiction thus has come a long way from Madhusudan Dutta's *Meghnadbad Kavya*, with its sensational reversal of the characters where, Ram becomes the coward prince and Ravan the valiant warrior. It has taken quite a long time for the authors to write the sequel to Dutt's masterpiece and it can thus be seen that the famed bigot's work was the ambitious strike at conventional paradigms of thought as reflected in Anand Neelakantan's recent *Asura: The Tale of the Vanquished*. Thus subalternity in theory and praxis has become a worldwide phenomenon with Spivak coming up with a critique of its Gramscian signification to include in its folds the lower strata of the power hierarchy:

The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is „evidence“; rather, both were used as object of

colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, though the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow (Spivak, 1988).”(qtd. in Louai 7)

The base of the evil however, needs a more indigenous means of addressing. With the knowledge that the term subaltern has wide ranging connotations, the effective means of liberation for them has to be geographically determined and culturally purged. Thus in the context of the Indian subcontinent where myths form a part and parcel of everyday existence of its populace and mythological characters still determine the code of conduct to be followed and the perceptions to be harbored, revisionist literature provides for an emancipating avenue, which after it has extracted itself from the auspices of the orthodox upholders of religion has become the hotbed of individualistic permutations. This will indeed give rise to the existence of alternate viewpoints provides for the better understanding of the cultural attestation of the oppressed, thus providing renewed vision towards understanding the female subaltern in the Indian context. However, it is important to note that the genre of this revisionist writing, often considered an addition to the already prevalent and reportedly decadent stream of feminist writings might be considered to belong to a genre that has gone beyond the feminist domain to attain what might be called a female writing spree, which does not inevitably speak for the female alone but rather considers the world as context for both the sexes. Mridula Garg’s words are worthwhile when it comes to the revisionist mythological writings in the Indian context, she claims:

The ardhnaris’vra principle has also helped the progression of feminist writing towards the broader spectrum of female writing. While feminist writing took half the world as its context female writing placed itself in the context of the entire society or the universe, including both male and female counterparts. The term of reference has progressed from identity and rejection of accepted moral canons to social relevance. (188)

The female subaltern according to the concepts of Indian mythology might be considered to have reached a step ahead of the global scenario to emerge as the upholder of the evolved proposition of the female writing wherein the subaltern female continue their renewed clamoring at not just expressing their findings of the principles of suppression inherent in the mytho-cultural diad but also suggests their reawakening to situate themselves in the larger society as creatures of relevance occupying half the population in civilized human society Menaka’s thoughts as portrayed by Kane after what might be considered a struggle for rights seem to reflect the ultimate realization: “ This was her home, her haven where she must shed burdens; she could not escape from it.

She had to stay here alone or not.” (Kane MC 288)

This therefore becomes the epiphanic doctrine guiding the female writing; the understanding that the world in all its brilliance is to be habited by both the sexes thus the battle axes has to

be dropped. Now the momentum of the feminist revolution has to take a significant turn and establish the voice of females to claim for themselves what they had been denied. The subaltern now speaks to claim their equality, the act of crying themselves hoarse at not being rightly spoken for has finally become passé.

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