

# Revisiting the characters of Mahabharata - Kavita Kane's 'The Fisher Queen Dynasty'

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## Abstract:

Retelling myth is a most-happening subject in Modern Indian English Literature. Kavita Kane, a journalist turned writer carved a niche for her in this genre of Indian English Literature. She is an author of six bestselling novels – all based on the side-lined characters of Indian myth. Saraswathi's Gift is her latest release. The success of these mythological narratives depends mostly on the ability of the author to re-invent the characters and win over the audience with their narrative which explains their actions. Kavita Kane excels in this art of persuasion with her exquisite characterization and gripping narrative. The success of her six novels which are purely based on myth is a testimony for this. Kavita Kane's *The Fisher Queen Dynasty* is an exquisite example for well-developed characters which are easily accepted and empathized by the readers owing to her credible exploration and narrative. This paper delves into the excellence of Kane's ability in representing the mythical characters in her modern fiction.

**Keywords:** Retelling of myth, Indian English Literature, Art of characterization, Mythological, narratives.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Myth or Mythology is the literature of the bygone days which helped the people in the aspects of religion, societal norms and code of conduct. In the days when people were not literates and could not reason out the social system, Myths served as guides. These mythical stories were passed on in oral tradition from one generation to the next owing to the illiteracy of the then population. For easy acceptance of these legends, the writers used supernatural beings as the prime characters. The ultimate function of myth was to justify the existing social system, traditions and cultures. The following quote truly justifies the intention of mythology.

*Myth has two functions. The first to answer sort of awkward questions that children ask...The second function of myth is to justify an existing social system... traditional rites and customs.* Robert Graves, Poet, Scholar and Eminent Myth Critic

## 2. MYTH IN LITERATURE

Literature and mythology are similar to each other. Both have a plot, a set of characters whose actions helps the progress of plot and a theme to convey. Both literature and mythology share a similar function of either teaching or entertaining. Literature for a long time made use of myth to make their stories interesting and ethnic. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a classic example for such literature. Literature of recent times took up a vocation to retell the

myths from an innovative point of view and bring out the hidden perspectives of those legends. Girish Karnad's *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain* are best examples of myths retold in modern literature. Many contemporary writers attempted successfully in their retelling of myth by shifting the paradigm from a male protagonists to a side-lined women as the central character like in Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*, *Karna's wife*. Several times these myths were retold from the point of view of the victim and achieved both critical and commercial success like Sharat Kommaraju's *Dear Sakhi : The Lost Journal of Ladies of Hastinapura* and Anand Neelakantan's *Shanta :The Story of Rama's Sister*.

## 2.1 KAVITA KANE AS A WRITER OF RETOLD MYTH

Kavita Kane is a contemporary Indian English feminist writer based in Pune. She completed her Masters in English Literature and Mass Communications. She started her career in journalism and grew to the position of Assistant Editor in 20 years. To fulfill her lifetime ambition she took up writing and published her first book *The Karna's Wife : The Outcast's Wife* in 2013 and met with a great success.

With the spirit of her first success, she continued to retell the myth. In her retelling, she brought to forefront the unseen, unheard and unappreciated aspects of the known stories. For her retelling she is appreciated as...

*She is an author of the new era of retelling.* - Lakshana Palat, Critic, Hindustan Times. Another winning edge of her retold myth is narrating the story from the point of view of the side-lined female characters that were either victims or overlooked. Her feminist stand point in her novels was applauded by many critics and publishers.

*I have known Kavita Kane for several years and have admired her sensitive and engaging portrayal of female characters from mythology.*

Milee Ashwarya, Publisher, Ebury publishing and Vintage, Penguin Random House India. At present she has six novels published - all based on less-popular women characters from Indian Mythology. The novels are

*Karna's Wife* (2013), *Sita's Sister* (2014), *Menaka's choice* (2015), *Lanka's Princess* (2016), *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* (2017) and *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019). Her latest work

*Saraswati's Gift* is to be released in July 2021 which presents the unknown saga of Goddess Saraswathi.

## 2.2 KAVITA KANE'S *THE FISHER QUEEN DYNASTY*

*The Fisher Queen Dynasty* is Kavita Kane's fifth novel published in the year 2017 by Westland Publishers. The novel is retelling of incidents from the epic Mahabharata revolving round the life of Satyavathi, the great grandmother of the Kauravas and Pandavas. In the popular Mahabharata, the character of Satyavathi is projected as a selfish woman who robbed Devavrat aka Bhishm of his right to the throne of Hastinapura. But Kavita Kane brings into light the losses which Satyavathi had to face right from her birth and the circumstances in which she had to act shrewd. Kavita Kane's Satyavathi is seen to be a feminist working hard to attain her birth right and the lost dignity.

## 2.3 REVISITING THE CHARACTERS OF MAHABHARATA THROUGH KAVITA KANE'S *THE FISHER QUEEN DYNASTY*

*The Fisher Queen Dynasty* is the tapestry of characters which narrates the eventful life of Satyavathi or Matsyagandha or Kali, the daughter of Dasharaj, the chieftain of a fishing community. The novel revolves round two important characters Satyavathi, the wife of Shantanu and Bhism, his son. The other vital characters are Dasharaj, Rishi Parashar, King Shantanu, King Uparichar Vasu, Mother Ganga. Other minor characters in the novel are Adrika, the Apsara and Amba, the princess of Kashi. The other characters which act as types are Ambika and Ambalika, the princesses of Kashi, Shalva, the king who was in love with Amba.

**Satyavathi**, the protagonist of Kane's *The Fisher Queen Dynasty* is a well-developed round character. She was wronged by many from her birth, which she becomes aware of very early. She is well-educated and well-informed about the socio-political issues of the world around her. She understands the ways of the worlds as early as fifteen years of age and is aware of the patriarchal setup with which she had to fight. She clearly grasps the weaknesses of the men who robbed her mother and herself their rights and dignity. Satyavathi is very calculated and knows how to barter her forte with those who want them for up scaling self – personally and politically. She makes her moves intelligently to attain the throne and become the queen which she lost due to the gender bias displayed by her biological father, King Uparichara Vasu. She is practical and assertive so as to get her will done, be it with passionate ascetic Parashar or lustful aged Shantanu and sees that every step she takes becomes useful for her growth. She is candid in getting her plans of upliftment go right. She is less emotional and more political in her moves when it comes for the welfare of her country, her family and her people. In toto, she is emotional and vulnerable - true to her feminine gender, yet strong and practical owing to her experiences. Kavita Kane has developed this character with such mastery that the villainous shades attributed to her in the original text

are completely forgotten by the readers and empathize with her condition.

**Bhism** or **Devavrat**, the son of King Shantanu, the rightful heir to the throne of Hastinapura is another important character in Kane's *The Fisher Queen Dynasty*. Kane's characterization of Bhism is very unique as he turns out to be a strong feminist amid the male chauvinist society in which he lives. He is well-built and well-groomed individual who is physically strong but sensitive from inside. From his adolescence he suffers the guilt of separation of his parents which makes him take the vow of celibacy and sacrifice the throne, which has nothing to do with Satyavathi. It was a mere coincidence that the fate brought these two people together. But in the original version, Satyavathi is blamed for Bhism's condition and tagged as a shrewd villain. But Kane reasons out with craftsmanship the irony of their relationship and the role destiny has played in turning out the situation. Though living in the era of patriarchy, Bhism is very courteous with the women characters in the novel. He goes to the end of abducting the three princess of Kashi on the request of Satyavathi which was for the common welfare of Kuru clan and the country of Hastinapura. He always tries to do justice to all those around him, including those who has wronged him. But his destiny always makes him a victim of rage of those who were harmed by him in the process of fulfilling other's desires. Kane's Bhism is again a round, well-developed and sophisticated feminist who accepts his fate with stoicism.

**Dashraj**, the chieftain of a fisher community who nurtures Satyavathi as his daughter after her abandonment by King Uparichar is the most refined character in Kane's *The Fisher Queen Dynasty*. He is the one who has seen with pain how women are abused by the lustful people in power and so has brought up Matsyagandha with lot of freedom and support so that she can grow to understand the ways of the world quickly for her defence. He makes wise decisions for his daughter and always supports her determination to upscale self. He is the one who knows most of the secrets of many important characters, but does not abuse them for personal benefit. Rather he enlightens them to make best use of their secrets for a better future. Kane develops Dashraj's character as a man of stature though he belongs to the lowest strata of the society.

**Mother Ganga**, the wife of king Shantanu and mother of Bhism is another important character who contributes to the development of plot. She very well knew the catastrophe which is in store for the throne of Hastinapura based on the fate. Yet she fulfills her role of wife and mother to perfection and grooms Bhism to be the one on par with great ascetics and Gods. In the original version, Ganga ruthlessly leaves Bhism putting him in deep despair. But Kane's Ganga is very responsible and affectionate towards Bhism and promises to appear and rescue him whenever he needs her. Hence, Kane recreates the character of Ganga as a reliable and affectionate mother.

**Rishi Parashar** is another important character which helps the progress of the plot. He in the original version is seen as a lustful ascetic who abuses the vulnerable Matsyagandh to quench his passion. But Kane reasons out the act of Parashar as his wisdom in selecting an able mother for his son. Also in Kane's *The Fisher Queen Dynasty* Rishi Parashar chooses her not for his lust, but to empower her in her war with fate. So, Kane makes the character of Parashar purposeful and a visionary.

**King Shantanu**, the King of Hastinapura is a character who becomes the cornerstone for the catastrophe of his country, his son and a young Matsyagandha. This fact is made oblivious in the original epic. But Kane in her version uncovers him and reveals his flaws. He is a shallow man who is vulnerable which contradicts his royalty. Unable to overcome the grief of separation of Ganga, he falls prey to the beauty of Matsyagandha and marries her much for the resentment of the courtiers and country. This wish of his also makes his son vow celibacy and sacrifice the throne to see his father live happily with his spouse.

Kane in her novel unleashes the truth of **Apsara Adrika**. In reality, Adrika is a fisher woman, the sister of Dashraj. She is the biological mother of Matsyagandh and Matsya fathered by King Uparichar who later dumped by him. She dies after the birth of twins and becomes a victim to the abusive behavior of those in power. Kane unleashes the tag of irresponsible mother from Apsara Adrika and drives the reality to the reader.

**Amba**, the princess of Kasi is depicted as fussy character in the epic Mahabharata. But Kane sets free this notorious tag and reasons out ably the cause of her behavior. Amba along with her sisters Ambika and Ambalika is abducted by Bhishm from her swayamvara which ruins her plans of marriage with Shalva. Due to this act, she is disowned by her father, her beau and also by Vichitravirya for whom Bhishm abducts her. This injustice done to her is subsided in the original and presented to the world as a rebel and shrewd woman. Kane in her novel presents her a feminist who courageously fights for self and does justice to the character. There are few more characters like **Ambika**, **Ambalika** the princess of Kasi and **Shalva**, the lover of Amba who are the types who represent the typical daughters and typical kings of the era who abide to the norms of the day without and blame fate and destiny for their condition.

Kane depicts these characters with ease to reveal the socio-cultural conditions of the age.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Retold myths in form of modern novels are always interesting as they attract the reader's inquisitiveness to know the unknown aspects of the mythical legends. The new paradigms, unique point of views and unforeseen characterization adds glory to existing plots and make them chart busters. It is an undoubted fact that Kavita Kane has excelled the art of retelling the myths from a feminist point of view without damaging the glory.

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