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The Presence Of Gender Dynamics In The Select Novels Of Kavita Kane

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Abstract:

This paper examines the recurring themes of gender discrimination and the complex journey of female identity in Kavita Kane's novels. It also attempts to delve into how Kane's works subvert traditional gender roles, offer alternative perspectives on historical events, and ultimately contribute to a broader understanding of female identity and its evolution within the Indian context.

Keywords: Mythology, Female Identity, Gender, Patriarchy

Literature Review:

Mohanty, Ayuta. 2018 *Revisiting the New Woman in Indian Mythology*. The present article focuses on two strong, courageous, aggressive women who appeared in Indian mythology. Even in the past, they had a wide-ranging perspective. When required, they were prepared to challenge and reject the established standards. The two female characters covered in this article are Paanchali from Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions* and Urmila from Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*. Both of these characters have been portrayed as independent women who are tough, feisty, strong, and outspoken. They defended what they believed to be right and opposed what they believed to be wrong.

Saha, Dr. Birbal. 2023. *Feminism in Society, Art and Literature: An Introspection*. In a broad range, feminists have defined the position of women, their place in society, and the obstacles they encounter. The current paper aims to examine how women are portrayed in society, literature, and the arts by examining the roles they play and the issues they face.

Mohanty, Ayuta, and Puja Khandelwal. "A New Perspective of Female Mythological Characters: Sita and Surpanakha." India is a patriarchal nation, and this is evident in its epics, where the patriarchal system obscures the female characters. Typically, female characters are portrayed as entities who are voiceless and without choice. They are merely victims who accept their lot in life. But as time has gone on, modern authors have begun to give these female figures new "avatars." Through the books of these authors, the women from the epics are beginning to speak for themselves. Sita and Surpanakha, two such figures from the epic Ramayana, are discussed in this article.

Introduction: Myths occupy an important role in the Indian literary culture. The repertoire of mythical stories in India is vast and these myths have faithfully delineated the societal pictures of their times. They have invariably highlighted the condition of Society and its people of that time. The women characters have in mythologies have been portrayed as the subordinated and subaltern who rarely had a voice and exalted status. Kavita Kane through her fictional works, the source of which is the vast Hindu mythology, has tried to deconstruct this belief that has served only to demean the status of women in society. Kavita Kane's novels often explore the themes of gender discrimination and the quest for female identity within the context of Indian mythology and History. Her reimagined narratives give voice to marginalized female characters, challenging traditional patriarchal structures and societal norms through her works. Kane highlights the struggles, resilience and agency of women throughout history, prompting readers to question and re-evaluate established power dynamics and the concept at female identity.

Ahalya's Awakening: A Reclamation of Agency

Ahalya, a prominent figure in Hindu mythology, begins her narrative within the confines of patriarchal norms. She is the wife of sage Gautama and finds herself ensnared in a tale of transgression and transformation. Her myth enters a pivotal moment when she is seduced by Lord Indra, the king of the gods, who disguises himself as her husband. This act of deceit leads to her husband's curse, turning her into a stone statue- a punishment for her perceived infidelity. Ahalya's initial portrayal clings to the traditional role of women in her society- chaste, submissive, and bound by marital fidelity. However, her awakening becomes emblematic of her defiance against these societal constraints. When Lord Rama, the hero of the epic the *Ramayana*, touches her with his foot, she is liberated from her certified state. This transformative act not only restates her to life but also grants her agency to reclaim her identity and voice. The narrative of *Ahalya's Awakening* serves as a profound commentary on gender roles that had been imposed upon her. She longs for freedom, autonomy, and self-expression, transcending the narrow confines of her prescribed role as a wife. Her awakening becomes a powerful symbol of rebellion against societal norms that seek to limit her agency solely based on her gender. Ahalya reclaims her identity and, in doing so, defies the conventions that initially led to her curse.

“You, Ahalya, now a stone...never to be restored to your form until He, son of Dasaratha, sets his foot on this Ashram.” (85, *Ahalya's Awakening*)

Ahalya's original myth involves her being cursed into a stone-like state as a punishment for infidelity but later redeemed by Lord Rama's touch. In *Ahalya's Awakening*, Kane delves into Ahalya's emotional and psychological journey during her transformation that allows her to experience life and love.

In *Ahalya's Awakening*, Ahalya's reawakening and resurgence from her stony imprisonment exemplify the potential for individuals to challenge and transcend societal norms, even in the face of oppressive gender roles. Her reclamation of agency serves as a symbol of defiance against the constraints placed on women in her society.

Urmila: Sita's Sister?

Kane elevates one of the characters of the Ramayana who has been sidelined by the spotlight in her second book, *Sita's Sister*. Urmila is commonly known as the younger sister of Sita, King Janaka's daughter, and Lakshman's spouse. *Sita's Sister* is about the sacrifices made by the characters, many of whom have been overshadowed or overlooked. To fulfil the pledge his father made to one of his wives, Lord Rama gave up his claim to the throne of Ayodhya. Sita, his worldly consort, showed her strength by following her husband's destiny and choosing the same route for herself. Lakshmana could not bear the thought of spending the fourteen-year exile apart from his elder brother, so he decided to let her path be automatically sealed. As a penance, Bharat chose to forgo all royal pleasures for the entire fourteen years of Ram's banishment. These are the epic story's towering representations of ideals, yet frequently the larger-than-life sagas overlook the contributions of some people who suffer the consequences of other people's choices and promises in silence. Their brilliance resides in their ability to subtly assist the main characters. In *Sita's Sister*, Kane has given Urmila, the voice which has been missing in the epic, Ramayana. The novel's title is incredibly well-written and accurately captures the life that is overshadowed and outshone. In this book, Urmila is described as a beautifully beautiful, vivacious little princess who isn't afraid to speak her thoughts. She has no desire to live in a fantasy or any other kind of delusion. Whether it's putting her husband's commitment to his brotherly obligations above her or playing second fiddle to the adoptive elder sister Sita, she meets someone who elegantly realizes and embraces her circumstances.

Regardless of whether it was her married kinship or her parents', Urmila shows the bravery and tenacity to be the rock for her family. She makes an effort to weave the relationships together and occasionally asks some really important questions in the process. She showed her boldness and confidence when she expressed her disapproval of Bharat's choice to spend the next fourteen years in Nandigram. She challenges his 'Dharma' in relation to Mandavi, his wife,

"We have talked about all sorts of the dharma of the father and the sons of the king and the princes, of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya, even of the wife for the 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? " (*Sita's Sister*: 219).

Kane tries to throw lights on the areas which have been ignored in the myth. When it is said that Urmila's life was all about her sacrifice, it portrays her as a submissive, weak woman who was requested to stay at home while her husband had to protect his brother. In the meantime, by using her time, fourteen long years in studying or sleeping (there are two versions, one that says she studied and became a highly respected scholar of the scriptures which Kane has adopted in her book, and the other where she has asked 'Nindra' the goddess of sleep to take away Lakshman's sleep so that he may perform his duty to protect Ram and Sita while Urmila herself would sleep in the entire period of the exile).

Urmila of Kane is wise and kind, delicate yet resilient, impetuous but responsible. Urmila is occasionally described as nonreligious and pragmatic, even though the novel is founded on mythology and religious texts. Even though Sita is adopted and even more favoured by her parents, Urmila understands and, at times, even forgives her parents for their injustice without becoming envious or ardent.

Ram receives harsh criticism from Urmila for allowing Sita to doubt her virginity following her rescue from Lanka. She challenges the knowledgeable sages, engages in combat with Lakshman, and even confronts Kaikeyi and Manthra. The various sides of Mandavi and Sutkirti, Bharat and Shatrughna's spouses, are also revealed in Kane's *Sita's Sister*. It follows that Kane has done a great job making sure Urmila, who was previously unknown, has a prominent role throughout the novel.

Lanka's Princess: A journey of Meenakshi from Suppression to Supremacy:

Kané's Meenakshi (the former name of Surpanakha), from the time of her birth, has been subjected to ill-treatment from her parents who consider her to be a dark monster and a blemish to the family prestige. Kaikesi believes that her daughter would not be able to help her brothers in the scheme of reconquering Lanka since it is not a woman's job to take part in warfare and political intrigue. She treats Surpanakha as a symbol of misfortune as she would be of no use to the family and she would have to be handed over to another family through the custom of marriage. The attitude of viewing a daughter as a burden is prevalent in a male-dominated society. The dejected mother's lament for giving birth to a girl child reflects the bitter fact that a girl child is considered inauspicious in many families.

Grown up as a neglected child, Surpanakha is deprived of love, affection and attention. Kaikesi's favourite child is Ravan and Vishravas's is Vibhishan. Kaikesi dreams of seeing Ravan as the ruler of Lanka, while Vishravas desires Vibhishan to study all scriptures and to become a scholar. But they are indifferent to their baby daughter. They do not provide her with proper guidance; they do not care about her upbringing, studies and career aspirations. Being a girl child, she is not allowed to earn and run the household and she is supposed to stay as a docile being in a corner of the house till her marriage. She is expected to take care of her clothes, manners and her physical appearance, she is supposed to take interest in household works and most importantly, she is not allowed to question, to resist or to confront. It is considered that a woman's sharpest weapon is a perfectly curved, fair body by using which she can satisfy her husband and give birth to sons, thus safeguarding her existence in a patriarchal society.

“She hardly looks beautiful or like me. She's quite ugly!" said Kaikesi, staring at the sleeping child, a frown deepening on her lovely face. 'She's scrawny and much darker than me!' (2,Lanka’s Princess)

Surpanakha’s mother Kaikesi exploited her beauty to allure the most powerful Rishi Vishravas and thus fulfilled her father Sumali’s wish of having powerful grandsons. But she considers her daughter Surpanakha as a burden as the latter is average looking and therefore she cannot be used in the same way. As Surpanakha did not inherit her father’s skin colour or her mother’s height and body structure, she is not considered to be beautiful in the light of the popular definition of the term. It is unfortunate that being a woman in a male-dominated society, her physical features and skin colour have become the prime factors determining her future prospects. The culturally constructed discrimination of women on the basis of their beauty has a deep-rooted effect on Surpanakha’s consciousness. She blames her skin colour for not getting good marriage proposals, she feels jealous of fair women like Mandodari. With her dark skin and sharp nails, she has failed to fulfil the fundamental requisite for being a woman as per the standardized notions of beauty and the feeling of inferiority for her complexion has haunted her since her childhood.

Kane's Surpanakha is not just a victim of her circumstances; she is also a figure of empowerment and agency. Despite the constraints of her society, she makes bold choices, asserting her desires and standing up against the injustices she faces. This portrayal is a stark contrast to the traditional depiction, where her actions are often seen as mere plot devices, lacking depth or purpose. In *Lanka's Princess*, Kane explores the transformation of Meenakshi into Surpanakha as a means of survival. In her portrayal, Kane effectively illustrates that Meenakshi, despite being an asura girl, shares many similarities with her peers of the same age. Similar to her peers, she too harbored the desire for a nurturing and affectionate family. However, she was not fortunate enough to attain the fulfillment of her aspirations. The level of attention that Kaikesi, her mother, bestowed upon her sons far exceeded the attention she directed towards her. The father, Rishi Vishravas, consistently displayed a lack of interest in her presence within the family. Furthermore, her brothers also exhibited a distant attitude towards her. Since early childhood, Meenakshi has experienced the distressing effects of abandonment. Despite her physical presence among her family, she exhibited emotional detachment from all members, rendering herself an outsider within her own community. In contrast to her brothers, the girl child found herself unable to fulfill her mother's ambitions or satisfy her father's sense of pride. Consequently, she frequently encountered a sense of being burdensome to the individuals from whom she sought the most essential love and support during her formative years. In a similar vein, Meenakshi also experienced the repercussions of gender discrimination, although this aspect of her life was scarcely depicted in the epic portrayal. In a society characterized by patriarchal norms, women are consistently positioned as the "other," being perceived as embodying qualities or attributes that are perceived to be absent in men. The underlying foundation of women's subordination is rooted in the concept of "deficiency" rather than the notion of "diversity". In order to establish the legitimacy of prevailing policies, patriarchal society exerts pressure on women to embrace

their subordinate position. This patriarchal hegemony further facilitates the perception of their subordination as an inherent and unquestionable aspect of their existence.

Conclusion:

Ultimately, the narratives of Ahalya, Urmila and Surpanakha resonate with contemporary discussions surrounding gender identity and expression. They remind us that gender is not a fixed entity but a dynamic and evolving aspect of external forces. All three narratives celebrate the malleability and the potential for individuals to transgress, redefine, and reclaim agency within the ever-evolving spectrum of gender roles. They remind us that gender, like identity itself, is subject to change and transformation, and that individuals possess the agency to transcend established norms, offering timeless lessons about the fluidity and resilience of the human spirit. Through her feminist retellings, Kane has attempted to break the gender biases in patriarchal society.

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