



Negotiating Identity And Power: Kavita Kane's Women Against Patriarchal Structures In Indian Mythology

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Abstract

The paper presents a critical analysis of how the Feminist re-telling of Indian mythologies by Kavita Kane reconfigured the marginalised women, namely, Uruvi, Urmila, Menaka, Surpanakha, and Ahalya, in a manner that allowed the latter to re-negotiate the sources of identity and power in the patriarchal formations. It attempts to highlight how the discourses of feminism in India are challenged by the narratives produced by Kane, and to expand feminist literary debates in India. A thematic and textual, as well as a qualitative analysis, was used. Karna Wife: The Outcast Queen, Sita Wife: The Sister of Karna, Lanka Wife: Princess of Lanka, Menaka Wife: The Choice of Awakening, and Ahalya Wife: The Awakening are 5 of the books by Kane that were chosen intentionally and used as main texts. The two frames of analysis were close reading and feminist criticism, respectively, and academic articles and critical reviews, respectively, helped in justifying close reading. Agency, resistance, silence, autonomy, and intersectionality of gender, caste, and morality were coded and analyzed as themes. The discussion shows that Kane heroines cross or bend down the traditional archetypes associated with submissive female or demonised women by exercising agency through silence, intelligence, emotional resiliency, and political power. Rather than strengthening binary ideas of what are perceived as ideal and fallen women, Kane remakes them as non-stereotyped, morally ambiguous individuals who challenge the standards that the patriarchal system should maintain, but must operate within the framework of structural pressures. The mythological center upon which she migrated ceases to be the cult of men, and rather the multiple-dimensional human events where the voices, feelings, and ethical concerns of women become central. The study contributes to theory in the sense that it explicitly expands feminist literary treatment, to mythological re-telling, to demonstrate that myth can be turned into a living story space, within which gender can be renegotiated. In the performance as it actually is, it is a performance structure or a form of performance enactment by academic practitioners and students in which canonical works can be revisited in these non-canonical forms. It is a policy issue because it says that good-better-best policies must be put into something in order to modify feminist rewrites of mythology in school and in cultural production in order to render all this more gender-conscious and empowering in its imagery.

Introduction

Background Information-

The Indian mythology of women assumes a paradoxical role. They incite resolute measures in mythological heroes like Ramayana and Mahabharata; on the other hand, they are muted, set aside, or relegated to the peripheral symbolic functions of patriarchal interpretation. Sita, Draupadi, Ahalya, and Surpanakha have long been presented as either symbols of chastity, obedience, and sacrifice or demonised as the embodiments of defiance. These selective representations not only formed attitudes toward culture in the historical context, but have also led to what is expected of men and women today.

Traditional mythic discourses, therefore, tend to promote the establishment of hierarchy by making male heroism dominant and reducing women to subordinate positions. To this end, they reproduce dualistic notions of good and fallen women, at the cost of the specifics of female agency. Feminist re-reads have become counter-narratives over the past several decades, retrieving repressed voices and redefining mythologized women as multi-layered, self-contained subjects. That is shifting, although the work of writers like Chitra Banerjee, Divakaruni, and Anuja Chandramouli is making the field mature and more balanced as far as the level of analytical and critical thinking is concerned.

Kavita Kane emerged as one such author in this literary trend who makes purposeful use of characters that appeared and continue to appear marginal to females. Her novels, including *Karna Wife*, *The Queen of the Outcast*, *Sita Sister*, *Lanka Princess*, *Menaka Choice*, and *Ahalaya Awakening*, turn marginal characters into heroes with a voice, heart, and brains.

+33Transmitting the male-oriented heroism to the moral, psychological, and social problems faced by women, Kane fills the gap between their mythic past and the feminist issues of the present and makes her narratives palpable to contemporary readers and scientists alike.

Problem Statement

Patriarchal versions of Indian mythology continue to predominate popular culture and scholarship despite the increasing popularity of feminist retellings. Women protagonists are still idealised, demonised, or doubled up, and their originality is killed in the name of traditional binaries. Although the works of Kavita Kane have been widely read and accepted to place mythological women into focus, there has been limited academic interest in studying her feminist approaches to narration.

The difference is that no analytical treatment of how Kane reconstructs the discourse of female identity and how she controls the system of power of the patriarchal society is given. Current literature tends to refer to her novels, but seldom digs deeper into how her heroines gain autonomy: through silence, perseverance, or politicking. What has been felt, however, is little concern about the contribution of Kane to wider discussion on feminist reconstructions in feminist literary theory and cultural studies in India.

This piece bridges such gaps by critically analyzing the stories told by Kane as interventions within a patriarchal myth-making. It explores the ways her lead characters disrupt the norms of male and female gender and re-negotiate agency and expand feminist discourse. By doing so, the research will help develop a more sophisticated argument regarding mythological reinterpretation as a bargaining position, resistance, and activism.

Feminist Literary Theory and Mythology

Feminist literary theory can be taken as a holistic approach to the analysis of the way texts perpetuate and/or disrupt gender hierarchies. The latter was established by Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* (1949), where she had theorised the woman as *The Other*, someone historically deprived of both subjectivity and agency. Then, following the same order, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) made it possible to create the illusion of performativity as not belonging to a biologically natural process, but to something that may be re-evaluated by society over and over again. These shall be miraculous conceptual variants of the mythology of therapeutic invention of archetypes of women, endlessly copied and redefined to suit culture and the competition of national interests on the patriarchal side.

According to myths, which people tend to view as sacred and eternal, are cultural blueprints that legitimise some gendered behaviours. They celebrate such traits as obedience, sacrifice, and chastity, and at the same time, they demonise sexual agency, defiance, or independence. Keeping in line with the evidence given, Neil and Simic (2019) elaborate that myth is not neutral and codifies social expectations that determine the position of women in the family and social order. Feminist reinterpretations of this hegemony are the reclamation of the old voice and subversion of binary forms of the ideal wife/mother and the fallen woman. Regarding this, as Weeks (2011) indicates, hidden forms of labour and endurance as resistance are emphasised in such reinterpretations, whereas, as Mäntymäki et al. (2015) note, so-called deviant women can disrupt dominant discourses by representing alternative subjectivities.

Indian Mythological Books as A Male Scripture.

Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are becoming the pillars of the Indian cultural imagination, and over centuries, have been used to enforce gender expectations. The ideal model of chastity, submissiveness, sacrificial submission an image that generations of women are forced to accept is Sita (Dharma, 2004). But her ordeal by fire is also an indication of how much agency women can have without patriarchal doubt and regulation. Rather, Draupadi is a courageous, but also fearless woman, who is unfortunate since everyone, even the high-ranking female, is belittled in the presence of the Kuru court, highlighting the fact that a woman is never on the same level as a man (Pillai, 2018).

Such gendering requirements are also enumerated in the *Puranas*, and in those the order of the day is obedience, and any transgression against the same is a crime (Banerjee, 2010). The story of Ahalya is one example that emphasizes the role of the patriarch and moral doctrine to establish what female virtue entails, not according to the female agent, but according to the male star. According to Slotkin (1973), myth always supports social order by reducing female plots to bigger male-oriented plots of war, conquest, and heroism. They have their moments of female protest, as we see when Draupadi asserts herself in her mighty interrogation of the *Sabha Parva*, but they are most commonly silenced, downgraded, or brought to a conclusion through some solution that the patriarchal system can accept.

FELF Fiction Indian English Fiction Feminist Reinterpretations.

The last two decades of feminist retellings in Indian English fiction have heralded a change in culture towards inclusivity. In the 2009 novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reconsiders Draupadi as a smart and conscious heroine, who is neither given a voice nor agency in the epic. Sita takes charge of her subjectivity yet again with the *Forest of Enchantments* (2019), here portrayed as a moral philosopher instead of a subordinate wife. Anuja Chandramouli reinterprets several mythological women with a focus on independence, emotions, and issues within themselves.

Devdutt Pattanaik (2018)- emphasizes gender fluidity in Hindu mythology, although this concept does not explicitly demonstrate feminism: the author refers to the tales of gods and goddesses who change genders or are androgynous. These reformulations destabilize the hard and fast categories and generate the field upon which new identities become possible. Combined, these writings demonstrate that as of now, there is no longer a reason to focus on mythology as an object of canonicizing and dominating impulse, but rather a space of gender and power bargaining (Chun and Barnett, 2021).

Critical Engagement with Kavita Kane

Amidst this literary movement, Kavita Kane has carved a distinct space by focusing exclusively on marginalised women who traditionally occupy the peripheries of epic narratives. *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013) foregrounds Uruvi, giving her voice and agency within the turbulent politics of the Mahabharata. *Sita's Sister* (2014) brings Urmila out of obscurity, portraying her endurance and sacrifice as a dignified form of strength. *Lanka's Princess* (2016) reclaims Surpanakha from demonisation, reconstructing her as a deeply wronged and misunderstood woman. *Menaka's Choice* (2016) interrogates the celestial courtesan's limited agency within divine politics, while *Ahalya's Awakening* (2022) transforms a narrative of curse and shame into one of resilience, autonomy, and reflection.

While Kane's novels enjoy popular readership, academic engagement has been sparse. Reviews often acknowledge her feminist interventions but fail to analyse the subtleties of her narrative strategies, such as her use of silence as a form of resistance, or the intersection of caste, class, and morality in shaping women's agency. There is also a lack of comparative work examining how her reinterpretations depart from or challenge canonical sources. Thus, Kane remains underexplored in formal feminist literary criticism (Bloomberg, 2009).

Research Gaps

From this expanded review, several key gaps emerge:

1. **Conceptual Gap:** Prior studies group feminist reinterpretations together but rarely analyse the distinct strategies of resistance in Kane's works—whether through dignified silence (Urmila), intellectual reasoning (Uruvi), emotional resilience (Ahalya), or political influence (Menaka).
2. **Contextual Gap:** Scholarship insufficiently situates Kane's fiction within broader socio-political debates on caste, gender justice, and cultural politics in India. Surpanakha's ostracisation, for example, cannot be understood without engaging with caste and ethnic hierarchies.
3. **Methodological Gap:** Much of the current discourse is based on general commentary or reader reception rather than rigorous thematic mapping or textual analysis. Feminist criticism, intersectionality theory, and narrative studies have been underutilised in systematically evaluating Kane's novels.
4. **Comparative Gap (Additional):** Few studies compare Kane's reinterpretations with other feminist authors like Divakaruni and Chandramouli, which could illuminate her unique contributions.

By addressing these gaps, the present research advances feminist literary scholarship, demonstrating how Kane reconfigures patriarchal archetypes and positions women as central subjects in mythological discourse.

Materials and Methods

In this research paper, a qualitative, textual, and thematic research design was used in order to investigate how the feminist version of Kavita Kane addresses the marginalisation of women in Indian mythologies. Five novels, *Karna Wife: The Queen of the Outcast*, *Sita Wife*, *Lanka Wife*, *Menaka Wife*, *Awakening of Alahlya*, have been chosen as the main texts specifically because they focus on woman characters who were traditionally pushed to the fringes of society. These stories were collected using close reading and thematic coding and centered on recurrent themes of identity, agency, silence, endurance, and power negotiation. To ensure the highest degree of validity, secondary sources in the sense of academic publication triangulation on results triangulated with results also triangulated with results to provide a guarantee of not just richness of interpretation but of context validity. Feminist criticism was used as a guiding tool in data analysis, with thematic mapping across texts helping to reveal similarities and differences in how the issues of autonomy and opposition to it were negotiated.

Textual engagement and embracing of the code, combined with a theoretical framework, offered a deep and discerning insight into the way the protagonists in Kane invert patriarchal conventions and reorganize masculine and feminine hierarchies.

Discussion

The results of this paper indicate how the feminist retellings of Kavita Kane resettle mythological women within patriarchal systems, directly relating to the analysis of the study aims.

Objective 1: To explore how Kane redefined mythological women so as to disrupt the norms of patriarchy.

By reworking her characters as multidimensional and ethically ambiguous, therefore, Kane is protesting the archaic divisions of an ideal woman and a fallen woman. Uruvi (Wife of Karna), in fact, is no longer a passive concubine, but a negotiator of her own social and political life, whereas Surpanakha (Wife of Lanka) is no longer a demoness, but an aggrieved woman whose resentment is social bias. This coincides with the reimagining of Draupadi performed by Divakaruni in *The Palace of Illusions* (2009), where the female characters are given agency and a much more realistic psychological balance, and with the claim of Beauvoir that women should become a subjects and not an objects (*The Second Sex*, 1949).

Objective 2: To define the means used by the heroines in Kane to bargain for power and autonomy.

The study concluded that the vital strategies of agency were silence, intelligence, spiritual toughness, and manoeuvring politics. Urmila is a symbol of reverent silence, Uruvi is a politician with diplomatic logic, Menaka is a woman with all her charm and with all her strategies, and Ahalya is a woman expected to turn an episode of shame to her own benefit. These results support the idea of performativity discussed by Butler (1990) because the women presented by Kane defy the gender roles by redefining the same roles they allotted to themselves. They also echo the views of Weeks (2011) that there is a need to redefine labour and endurance as resistance in the feminist framework.

Objective 3: To place the narratives of Kane in a feminist literary perspective.

Restoring the center of myth upon female heroism, female sentiment, female morality, and female plight, Kane extends the feminist literary practice in India. Her writings resonate with the wider feminist myth-making of writers like Anuja Chandramouli and Devdutt Pattanaik, but are one step ahead in their exclusive attention to women. The characters Kane works with illustrate the interjection of gender, class and morality - they reveal that agency is not so much a suggestion of gendered power as a suggestion of caste status, social roles, and even moral obligations. This helps to back up the point Banerjee (2010) made that Indian myth reinforced several types of social control, which feminist reinterpretations will have to deal with.

On balance, the analysis shows that the main characters of Kane help to break the archetypes of patriarchy and offer new examples of feminist resistance. That way, her stories bring feminist literary theory to a new level by turning mythology into a living, dynamic negotiation space between tradition and contemporary gender discourse.

Results

The analysis of Kavita Kane's selected novels yielded several key findings aligned with the study objectives:

Repositioning Marginalised Voices: Kane successfully brings sidelined female figures—such as Uruvi (Karna's Wife), Urmila (Sita's Sister), Surpanakha (Lanka's Princess), Menaka (Menaka's Choice), and Ahalya (Ahalya's Awakening)—to the centre of mythological narratives. These characters are depicted with psychological depth, emotional intelligence, and independent agency, challenging their traditional roles as secondary or silenced figures.

Patriarchy Archetype - Subversion Kane reconstructions mythological heroines as three-dimensional and morally complex instead of binary machinations of the ideal and the fallen woman, which are imposed. Her characters fall outside the dichotomies of inactive innocence and active criminality but provide alternative forms of agency, being disruptive of their ascribed male-patriarchal roles.

Agency and Resistance tactics: The protagonists declare their independence in a variety of ways: in silence and noble strength (Urmila), in mental rationality and socialization (Uruvi, Menaka), in emotional might (Ahalya, Surpanakha), and political force (Menaka in the heavenly spheres). All these forms of negotiation depict how women negotiate systemic limits and mark out space to resist.

Change at the Narrative Center: Kane moves the epicenter of mythology beyond male-centred heroism and to the emotional, ethical, and personal domain of women. Wars, politics, and victory are just scenery, but the female battles of recognition, dignity, and voice become the main drivers of the narratives.

Experience of Gender and Classes and Morality: The relationship of power will be negotiated in Kane's fiction not according to gender but according to caste, social roles and expectations of morality. The royal birth of Uruvi gives her power and makes her a prisoner of the rules of the state; the rakshasi status of Surpanakha alienates her but leaves her at the mercy of moralizing forces; the austerity state of Ahalya subjects her to moral judgment; the divine role of Menaka gives her compliments and power but can also make her an object of divine manipulation.

Taken together, these results prove that the protagonists of Kane challenge the traditional female patriarch by restructuring identity, opposition, and power structures in mythology.

Conclusion

This paper explored the ways in which the Indian myths that Kavita Kane remakes along feminist lines repositioned female outcasts and restructured their negotiation of feminine identity and feminine power within patriarchal constructs. The results indicate that Kane disrupts the binaries of ideal and fallen women by depicting her heroines as poly-dimensional, ethically ambiguous, and self-conscious.

As an answer to the research questions:

1. What then does Kane do to patriarchal norms by reinterpreting mythological women? She causes side-lined characters to speak, interior, and act and end up in archetypal roles they all know.
2. How have her female characters negotiated autonomy? They embrace silence, intellect, emotional perseverance, and political power as their mode of resistance to systemic constraints.
3. What does the feminist literary discourse say about Kane and her stories? Even though the focus on male heroism her novels replaced with feminine conflict, feminine feelings, and feminine ethics, however, they add new variables in the system of feminist criticism prose writing in Indian literature and more mythological re-reading possibilities.

In general, the paper turns Kane into a focal point of feminist literary practice, showing that myth can also be a site of bargaining, resistance, and force.

Recommendations

Contribution to Theory: This study contributes to feminist literary theory by demonstrating how mythology can serve as a dynamic site of resistance and renegotiation. By repositioning marginalised voices, Kane's novels expand theoretical understandings of agency, subversion, and moral ambiguity in literature. They illustrate how feminist criticism can move beyond the deconstruction of patriarchal texts to the constructive re-creation of women's narratives, aligning with Beauvoir's call for women as subjects and Butler's notion of gender performativity.

Contribution to Practice: In practice, the findings highlight the importance of incorporating feminist retellings into literary pedagogy. Teaching Kane's works alongside canonical mythological texts can foster critical engagement with gender, power, and cultural memory. For students and researchers, her novels provide accessible case studies for applying feminist criticism, narrative analysis, and intersectional approaches, thereby enriching classroom discussions and expanding methodological tools in literary studies.

Contribution to Policy: At the policy level, the study underscores the need to integrate feminist reinterpretations of mythology into academic curricula and cultural programming. By including such texts in school and university syllabi, policymakers can encourage gender-sensitive education that challenges stereotypes and promotes equality. Moreover, fostering translations, adaptations, and dissemination of feminist retellings in media and cultural institutions can broaden their social impact, ensuring that narratives of women's agency and resistance reach wider audiences.

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