SPECTER FROM A FICTION: AN UNTOLD STORY OF A WOMAN, BY A WOMAN, POSSIBLY TO EVERYONE…

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Abstract:
The present paper focuses on the projection of Indian women of Eastern world fighting for their faith in fiction with special insight to Kavita Kane’s “The Fisher Queen’s Dynasty” - a story of not-so-great portrayed mythological woman character Mastyagandha- The Queen of Hastinapur. Kane depiction of Satyavathi is admirable as she is able to bring out concoction of beauty, ambition, vulnerable and sorrow in her character. Author exposes the raw ambition of character in discourse brings out Satyavathi character through the words “It is better to I use my ambition wisely. I would rather make use of it and get benefits from it, as I have done it to Rishi Parashar”. Kavita Kane is one of the notable Indian authors, who had created tremor with her characters inspired from Mythology. The inquisition of least praised characters of mythology especially women who were marginalized, prejudice, or misrepresented. Providing cathartic voice to these victimized women (as projected in her writings) of patriarchal traditions. All the characters of Kane punctured the patriarchal expression by raising the voices of these woman characters of mythology. Her books are a beautiful exploration of human contradictions. The fallout of these contradictions leads to notable disaster and it induces the reader to appreciate these tensions as there were no standard answers to solve them. 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. This paper delves into the excellence of Kane’s ability in representing the mythical characters in her modern fiction.

Key Words: Characterization, Mythology, patriarchal expression, traditions, victimized
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

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. 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.

Kavita Kane- A mythological Connoisseur:

Kavita Kane, born in Mumbai, being alumna of Fergusson College explored her knowledge and passion for writing by completing her Masters in English literature and Mass Communication. The pragmatic career for witting was destined after working for twenty years as a Journalist and after
the success of her debut novel “Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen”. 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.

**Feminism- Eastern perspective:**

Feminism even though a widely discussed topic across the world, still needs recognition especially through literature. Indian women writers like Toru Dutt, Kamala Das, Arundati Roy, Anitaa Desai, etc created a parallel world of fiction that speaks the faith of real world. The major setback of Indian Feminist writers is that they need to justify the projection of character without forgetting Indian customs and cultures. Writings of Indian feminists, especially the writers like Toru Dutt, Ismat Chutagi etc made an impact globally. Also, “it has always struggled to create space for women to fight against cultural impositions and religious restrictions, which underline and reinforce the economic, social, political and psychological suppression” (“The Hindu”). Feminism in India as mentioned by Dwijendre Nath Thakur “The history of feminism in India is regarded as mainly a practical effort and mostly non-existent. Compared to some other countries there has been only sparse theoretical writing in feminism” (458).

The interests and concerns of upper-caste women represented rather than the gleaming experiences of Indian women. Being acquainted with this reality, Indian feminism can more effectively challenge historically entrenched and varied [Systems of oppression] (“HuffPost”). There is also a dire need to represent the entire “femdom” rather than a particular sect. Indian feminism has tended to represent the interests and concerns of upper-caste women rather than reflecting the
experiences of Indian women en masse. By recognizing this fact, Indian feminism can more effectively challenge historically entrenched and varied [systems of oppression] (“HuffPost”).

Indian Psychologist, Taraasha Chopra observations on the feminism that reign in the present scenario are

“The more education I received, the more aware I became, the conversation on feminism changed. The problems of underprivileged women became nothing more than just facts and figures on a paper. The feminist discourse became more nuanced and we moved on to talking about issues such as socialization, subtle messages of discrimination, rape culture, glass ceilings etc. So the focus of my feminism was more oriented towards the privileged, urban, educated women who were stuck in traditionalist roles while having modern mindsets (“The Ugly Truth about Feminism in India”).

A Delhi based graphic designer and illustrator Kruttika Susarla, presented Indian feminist movement using an alphanumeric characters that represent a diverse perspective. She states that: “I wanted to work on a series that would contextualise the feminist movement within the realities and experiences of women and minorities in India… the issues surrounding women and minorities here are so complex—it’s mixed with religion, caste, sexuality and majority of public discourse” (“Feminism in India”).

Resurgence of Anti Female Heroes of Indian Mythology by Kane:

We all were brought up listening to the mythological stories about Hinduism and the glorious characters. Some of them left us overwhelmed as they were larger than life. It is difficult to believe that even these characters existed because of the grandeur of characters. The mythological tales we heard are strongly reverberated about male characters but how many of us know about the strong female characters that were overshadowed by male characters and are treated as wives, vamps or either as mothers. Women characters are either idyllic or unconstructive they posses mind of power and sensibilities and were blessed with sharp insight. Our culture is great because of the strongest women characters in our mythology that played a great role in shaping the culture of our country. Women characters are not only determined, brave and graceful but they are perfect example of beauty with brains.

At present Kane has six novels published - all based on less-popular women characters from Indian Mythology. “Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen” (2013) :The book projects the unsaid
extraordinary anti-hero of Mahabharata, even when bestowed with arms and blessings of Sun God (his father). The story unfolds the cusped situation of the offspring’s of Kuru dynasty. Uruvi wife of Karna and a witness to Karnas struggle and fate is beautifully woven by Kane can turn the readers’ imagination to real rather considering it as fiction. Kane’s “Sita’s Sister (2014)”: The most over looked but a prominent character of Raamayana. Urmila, the neglected wife of Lakshmana and Sita’s sister who waited for fourteen painful years instead following her husband in exile with his brother. Urmila kept herself composed all through and after the trio returned, she fulfilled her duties of a devoted wife with love and compassion. “Menaka Choice” (2015) and “Lanka’s Princess” (2016) of Kane are notable for their characterization with justified voice that too without breaking a well fabricated epics. “Ahalya’s Awakening “(2019) a determined woman who yeams to control her own destiny. Carving the niche through her vogue of Anti-hero (female) to show the representation of dilemma and obstacles faced by women is really commendable but goes overboard at times.

**A great usurp from Indian mythology Mahabharat:**

The story of Stayavati, Devvrat/Bhism and Shantanu is very well known mythology that is usually presented as a brief prelude to the great Indian mythology Mahabharata to explain the birth of Paandu and Dhritarasstra. A piercing, insightful look at the great matriarch of the Kuru Dynasty and how character of Satyavtahi shape the future of Hastinapur is beautifully presented by Kavita Kane as she explores the depth of the Epic.

Abandoned as a baby, Matsyagandha also known as Daseyi Yojanagadha Stayavathi but identified with a great deal as the queen of Hastinapur, preyed by a Rishi, she determines herself to be woman with strong desire and decides that next time she is with a man; she will be the one to win. Satyavathi, an ordinary woman with exceptional will, who denied her by her royal birth right adopted and brought up by her maternal uncle a meager- fisherman, later claims to the throne of Hastinapur by her clever tricks, but sadly she had become a wager of the dirt politics, turning her into a bitter and wicked queen. Bhism, a handsome young Prince of Hastinapur, a true heir to the throne of Hastinapur sacrifices everything for his father’s romantic wishes to marry a fisher girl. And she wins the throne of Hastinapur for herself, and makes a promise to herself that her sons and her blood will be the future of Hastinapur at any cost either by deceiving or manipulating. In the palace she is disdained and scorned, she has faced lot of discrimination but setting all that
aside she had played the game of politics ruthlessly. She has learned to be unscrupulous and ruthless to estrange her from everyone around.

Enormously gripping characters from the great Indian Epic Mythology, Mahabharata - “THE FISHER QUEEN’S DYNASTY” revolves around the two key protagonists, Satyavathi, the fisher queen and Bhism, the son of Ganga and King Shantanu. Kane in “THE FISHER QUEEN’S DYNASTY” narrated from the perspective of Satyvathi, matriarch of the Kuru clan. The story starts with the scene of Bhism, son of Ganga and king Shantanu lying on the bed of arrows, contemplating about his life and mistakes. He speculates whether he could have avoided the past mistakes. The rest of the story is presented in the form of a flashback to Bhism’s life till Satyavathi leaves Hastinapur.

A Transformation from Fisher woman to Queen of Hastinapur:

Two babies were born out of wedlock to King of Chedi, Vasu and the fate turns bitter for the new born twin girl who is abandoned by her father and brought up by her uncle, a poor fisherman. The poor fisherman happily takes care of the girl and names her Mastyagandha popularly known as Kali in the fisher community due to her dark skin and stinking smell. Satyavathi may not be born with good looks but her sharp educated intellect has led her to be the queen of Hastinapur by seducing the young rishi, and later the king of Hastinapur. But sadly life becomes a different puzzle to solve the political game in the state. As the story goes, Satyavathi is seen as a young girl who obtains powers from the Young Rushi Parashar by doing him sexual favor.

King Shantanu of Hatinapur who entangled by the beauty of fisher woman Stayavathi asks her hand in marriage, Satyavathi father demands an vow that Bhism, son of King Shantanu and Ganga should not be the heir of throne and should not get married and should stand on the vow of celibacy. Being ever dutiful son to fulfill the sexual desire of his father Bhism renounced the throne and took the vow of celibacy. This decision had a lasting impact on the Kuru dynasty. Queen Satyavathi’s grand children were the Kauravas and Pandavas, who later engaged in a great war Mahabharata.
The handsome son of Ganga and future King of Hastinapur grows up to become a dependable, intellectual and a kind heart that easily stole the hearts of the people in his kingdom. But the destiny did not allow him to become the king rather he has become minister of Hastinapur.

“It took King Shantanu a moment before Ganga’s words sunk in. ‘You mean it? I shall have my son back some day?’ he said hopefully.

‘Yes; not because I want to be kind to you,’ she said sorrowfully, ‘but because this poor boy is doomed to live a cursed life on earth. As your son, he is born pious, wise and devoted, but will have to endure endless mortal pain and suffering. I name him Devavrat…” (p-15)

If it is looks and lust which can seduce a man, weaken him, then I shall use my charms to get what I want. I cannot afford to have morals like the rich and royal. The righteous would argue that is unscrupulous, but I would rather be branded that, than be forgotten as a casualty, as my mother was. “If men can use women, why can’t women get something out of men? Beauty and lust is just that – a means to an end.” (Book Review - The Fisher Queen’s Dynasty)

The domestic squabbles of Shantanu and Satyavathi prior to their marriage; the reluctance of the people in the palace and in the kingdom to accept new queen and the ability to endure it with great detail was discussed in the story. The first segment of the narrative deals with the inner denial of Satyavathi and Bhism with convolution of politics in a smooth manner where as the consecutive segment is filled with apprehension of Satyavati and her progeny that holds trajectories clues of Mahabharata with Bhism’s as a curbed embellisher with his idealism loses its clutch in later segment.

**Revisiting the characters of Mahabharata through Kavita Kane**

*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

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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.

‘Because you are a girl,’… ‘Kings need princes, not princesses! If it had been up to him, he would have probably drowned you in the river,’(p-38)

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 strengthening self to 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.

How was she to be a mother to a man more her age, mother to a man whom she had divested everything of—his love, his life, his marriage, children, crown and kingdom? A mother is one who gives selflessly; she had taken everything from him. (105)

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.

“I—not Fate or God—shall be responsible for my own happiness, my own future. I promise myself, I will not be the victim anymore; nor will my child... He will gain more respect there than with an unwed fisherwoman.’(38)
The whole transformation of Matsyagandha to Kali to Satyathi through ‘Daseyi’ (meant one of the dasa) is really opulence of Kanes verbiage. ‘I know. As Satyavati, you are the epitome of satya,’ drawled Kripi, her tone implying otherwise. ‘You are well known as Kali, the dark one. But I have heard the king call you Matsyagandha and you make your presence felt sufficiently enough by your . . . er . . . smell. . .’ she said, as if to imply that the fragrance the new queen emanated was the stench of rot. (100)

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.

Kali shuddered, an inaudible ‘No!’ slipping from her horrified mouth. ‘You can’t take that vow!’

‘Mother,’ bowed the Prince.

‘It is done.’ Mother—the word sounded horribly foreign to her, crushing her with the burden of its weight. The prince said it with strange detachment; .... By calling her his mother, he was reminding her of who she was: his father’s wife.(p-78)

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 and through whom Kane expresses thoughts of reasons behind Bhism considering Satyavaathi’s will.

Through her broken sobs, Bhishm saw who Satyavati was—a child who could have been a princess, but was rejected and forgotten. Now he knew where the burning desire and ambition came from. Her ruthlessness had been her sole weapon of survival, of fighting back. (p-127)

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.

Devavrat scrutinized the man standing before him, and he felt a strange admiration for him. This is how a father should be, fighting with all his dignity and conviction for the future of his child. (76)

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 Bhishm 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 Bhishm to be the one on par with great ascetics and Gods.

Ganga knew it was time for her to leave both of them. She had united the father with his son. With a sinking heart, she looked at her boy for the last time; his eyes crinkling, smiling shyly with that unruly swathe of hair over his forehead. From Heaven to Earth, or would it be Hell for him, she thought, not daring to cry, lest her tears dried up the earth. (36)
In the original version, Ganga ruthlessly leaves Bhishm putting him in deep despair. But Kane’s Ganga is very responsible and affectionate towards Bhishm 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.

‘He will be our child, Matsyagandha. He will be so exceptional that no one will dare call him illegitimate,’ he said cryptically. ‘You are an extraordinary girl yourself. You can never be bound by conventions or be tied down by others. You were born to rule, princess!’(23)

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.

Shantanu hesitated, wondering again if he was doing the right thing. Why must I live in loneliness? Do I not deserve companionship? As a king, I have delivered all responsibilities towards my people and my kingdom. Do I not deserve love and joy in my later years?(60)

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.

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. 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.

When there is incarnation of God as a human, he is not bound by Karma. The sankalpa and Yaga takes this human incarnation of God to quell Adarma and restore the order of Dharma. To understand and to teach the lessons of life and salvation God incarnates human form or the Jeevatma (from a lecture by Sri Krishnamurthy Sastrigal). For instance, Lord Rama life of solitude gives a valuable guidance for those in wallowed sorrow. Lord Krishna life speaks about the adversary of ego that has to bow down to joy and love.
She said sadly, looking down at the beautiful, fair-eyed, fair-skinned baby, ‘. . .this child is the cursed Prabhas. Had you not stopped me, he, too, could have been delivered from Rishi Vasisht’s curse.’ Shantanu looked stunned with horror. ‘Probably Prabhas, being the chief culprit, was cursed to endure a longer life on earth,’ she reasoned, giving a helpless shrug. ‘Why did you not explain all this before to me?’ said Shantanu, visibly shaken. ‘You could have saved all of us from this tragedy. . .’ (14)

The truth of all Jeevaatmas is to expiate of their Karma, good or bad, is explained clearly in all his Avatars be it Lord Rama Kousalya or Lord Krishna to Arjuna. Kanes Satyavathi is embodied similarly. At a time when she has to be looked after by her sons, she lost them; her desire for her offspring to be on throne (instead of Bhisma), a dream, a determination she nurtured since childhood, but faces the pangs of disappointment. At a given time she repents and expresses that accepting the destiny would have been a better option rather than bearing the unfortunates.

The innate language sense of the author brings out the delightful reading into a satisfying devour. Kane characterization and her choice of terms through these characters prove that the characters have a strong mind of their own. The exhaustive research amazes the readers and makes them feel the experience of time travel and also incline to familiarize the true emotions of the women she wishes to chronicle. 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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