

# Mythopoeic Renderings of Kavita Kane: A Glimpse from a Feminist Perspective

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## Abstract:

This paper focusses on the mythopoeic renderings of the contemporary Indian feminist writer Kavita Kane who through her novels like *Lanka's Princess*, *Menaka's Choice* and *Ahalya's Awakening* provide the readers with a fresh and different perspective. It analyses how the afore mentioned writer recreates female characters in such a way that they evoke sympathy and respect in contrast to the epic narratives wherein their voices are feebly heard and are generally derided, denounced and cursed. It examines how the writer through her retellings turn the vilified Shurpanakha into Lanka's Princess, the seductress Menaka into a woman of love and compassion and the cursed Ahalya into a warm human being replete with human emotions. Looking at them from a feminist, subverted perspective of Kavita Kane, these negative characters are imbued with an outlook of acceptability – Shurpanakha is not as vicious as she seems to, Menaka is not as lecherous as she is perceived and Ahalya is not as philandering as she is generally portrayed. In the prevalent myths concerning these women, their actions are viewed through the glasses of patriarchy. But in the subverted portrayal of Kavita Kane, they strike as individuals longing for love. Any misdemeanour on their parts is not without a reason.

**Keywords:** Mythopoeia, Shurpanakha, Menaka, Ahalya, Feminism, Perspective, subverted portrayal

Indian mythology draws its origin from the sacred texts of Hinduism like the Vedas, *The Upanishads*, *The Puranas*, the two great Indian epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. Each one of the sacred texts is abound in myths of varied types with regard to the origin of the world, creation of human beings, animals, plants and the natural world around us. To put in the words of Richard Chase, myths serve as pragmatic charter for humanity. These myths have provided writers with plenty of materials to create their works imbued with a sense of familiarity to the readers. Creative fiction based on mythology has become a trend of the day with the modern writers. Many contemporary writers like Devdutt Patnaik, Amish, Ira Mukhoty, Vaishnavi Patel, Koral Das Gupta and Kavita Kane have attempted to recreate the epic characters from a different perspective which sheds a brighter and better light on them. In this regard, this paper attempts to analyse the mythopoeic recreations of Kavita Kane in her novels *Lanka's Princess*, *Menaka's Choice* and *Ahalya's Awakening*.

The mythopoeic imagination seen in the novels of Kavita Kane is distinctive in its feminist approach. In her novels, she makes the insignificant, derided and condemned women characters in the Indian epic narratives like Shurpanakha, Menaka and Ahalya as her protagonists. These women characters in her

novels are portrayed as victims of their circumstances. By making these women speak for themselves, Kavita Kane sheds a more positive light on them.

In her novel *Lanka's Princess*, which is written in the form of Krishna narrating the tale of Shurpanakha to Kubja about her previous birth, Shurpanakha is depicted as a warm and affectionate woman, Meenakshi who cares for her brothers Ravan, Vibhishan and Kumbha, adores Ravan's son Meghnad and is greatly attached to her grandmother Taraka. The shrewish nature on her part is attributed to the loveless environment in her life. She never gets the motherly love which is due to any daughter. She is often taunted by her mother Kaikesi for the lack of brains as well as looks. Her father Vishravas though more understanding than her mother is also discontent with her for not excelling in the Vedas. All through her life, she suffers from the pangs of an unwanted child, disliked by her parents. Shurpanakha being a sorceress is looked upon with distrust and contempt. But in this novel, it is looked upon as the art of the Asura clan. It is the natural propensity which she displays in trying to master witchcraft which is like any other art. It is natural and befitting for a woman who is born in the clan to nurture the art which distinguishes them from others. It is not her fault to have been born in that clan.

Shurpanakha being the cause of the Lankan war and the downfall of her brother Ravan is another vehement criticism directed against her. But looking at from her perspective, it is understood as the reaction of a woman who has been wronged to seek vengeance. She instigates her brother Ravan into his misdoings like abducting Sita, challenging Ram and Lakshman and warring with them as retribution for killing her darling husband Viduyujiva, in whom she finds the perfect love which she has been longing to have all through her life. She has her reason for wanting to defeat Ram and Lakshman too. She understands them to be invincible in killing her grandmother Taraka and defeating her grand uncles Mareech, Dushan and Khara. On coming to know the death of her dear son Sambhu Kumar due to the arrow struck though unknowingly by Lakshman, she resolves to confront and challenge them.

Shurpanakha's lusting after Ram and Lakshman is another disparaging censure of her character. It is defended as the longing of a lonely woman who is deprived of love. Looking through her eyes the so-called virtuous Ram does not seem to act like one. Had she not been ridiculed by Ram and maimed by Lakshman, she would have acted with less contempt. She evokes feelings of appreciation when she decides to stall her intention of killing Lakshman's baby as she is reminded of her happy life with Viduyujiva in the love between Lakshman and Urmila.

"In Lakshman she saw her dead Viduyujiva, in Urmila she saw herself and in the tiny Angad she saw her Kumar. She could not hurt any of them" (*Lanka's Princess*)

In the Mythopoeic recreation of Shurpanakha in *Lanka's Princess*, she is not altogether the embodiment of evil but a sympathetic and considerate woman who loves her near and dear ones and shows compassion for others.

In *Menaka's Choice*, the apsara Menaka who is remembered as the seductress who thwarts sage Vishwamitra from attaining the ambition of his life to be the Brahmarishi, is given a platform to voice out her side of the story. Menaka agrees to the plan of Indra who does not want Vishwamitra to gain more

powers, fearing a threat to his position, not quite willingly but due to her separation from her Deva Gandharva Vishwvasu. Though the affair is meant to be a subterfuge, Menaka starts loving Vishwamitra genuinely. In due course of time, there blossoms a beautiful relationship of a couple loving, sharing and caring for each other. It becomes a camaraderie of two intellectuals who are involved in discussions concerning the many topics of Vedas. Like a devoted wife, Menaka keeps reminding of his meditative duties. It is the sight of a perfect family one witnesses in the birth of their daughter Shakuntala. Finding Vishwamitra straying from his path of achieving the crowning glory of his life- to be a Brahmarishi, Menaka is guilt-ridden to have been the cause of his failing in attaining the ultimatum. After ten years of blissful and contented family life, she decides to bring their relationship to an end.

“For a while, as Kaushik’s wife, she had enjoyed her status but she could not stay further to experience the fall of a mighty man..... And it was only she who had to find his way back for him. Even if it cost losing him forever.” (*Menaka’s Choice*)

It is due to her sincere love that she discloses her real motive to Vishwamitra but not at the behest of Indra. The popular myth of Vishwamitra cursing Menaka not to come before him ever after is subverted by Kavita Kane as an utterance of a pained soul. It is actually the curse which Vishwamitra inflicts on himself rather than Menaka. Understanding the true love of Menaka only, he feels no animosity towards her even after her disclosure. In *Menaka’s Choice*, Menaka is seen not as an enchantress but a loving woman who sacrifices her love for the sake of love.

*Ahalya’s Awakening* written in the form of Menaka relating the story to king Nahusa is meant to be the defence of Ahalya against the norms of the society. She is presented as a precocious child who has an incessant thirst for learning. Though a princess by birth and a woman of unparalleled beauty, she is not allured by the opulence surrounding the royal life. She falls in love with rishi Gautam, the man who is known for his wisdom. She finds herself drawn towards the intellectualism of rishi Gautam. She chooses to marry the intellectual Gautam over the handsome Indra, the king of the Gods.

At the beginning, it was a joyous marriage between two intellectuals who share moments of intimacy as well as spiritual wisdom. As days pass by, when Ahalya becomes the mother of four children, Gautam keeps her away from learning due to the demands of her motherhood. He shows reluctance in including her to attend his lectures. He stops sharing both physical and intellectual proximity with her. He becomes reclusive and intent in his spiritual pursuit. Sensing her vulnerable position and unhappy married life, Indra in the guise of rishi Gautam approaches and seduces her.

In the voice of Ahalya, who does not plead guilty but to be considered as the longing of a lonely woman who has been thwarted by her husband for so long, one can hear the voice of a modern woman who does not feel shy in exhibiting her sexuality.

The popular myth of Ahalya’s curse of being turned into a stone by rishi Gautam is deconstructed by Kavita Kane. In her depiction, it is not Gautam who turns her into a stone but it is Ahalya’s way of seeking enlightenment to know who she really is through making herself into a stone. It is her symbolic resistance to the accusations of the society which looks at her as an unfaithful wife. Her redemption at the touch of

Ram is portrayed as Ahalya's decision to come back to life at the sight of unjudgmental individuals Ram and Vishwamitra, who unlike others do not condemn or perceive her as an adulteress.

"I searched all these years for myself- and I only found Ahalya, the woman I was supposed to be born as: unblemished, without any faults. I had no halo in me, no sin, no crime, no guilt. What I had done was to respond to the call of life within me" (*Ahalya's Awakening*)

In Kavita Kane's mythopoeic recreations of these three women- Shurpanakha, Menaka and Ahalya are not merely epic personages who bear the stamp of antiquity. Throughout her narratives, one can perceive the parallel between antiquity and contemporaneity. In the rebellious voices of these women- Shurpanakha who seeks to be addressed as a woman(princess) but not a demoness, Menaka as a sincere lover not an enchantress and Ahalya as a fallible woman but not a cursed being, one can hear the voice of the modern woman who seeks liberation from the gendered norms. It echoes Helene Cixous' idea of a liberated woman,

"Write yourself, your body must be heard, only then will the immense resources of unconscious spring forth"

In these retellings, one sees not a historical quality but a relevant contemporary significance. They seem to endorse the view of Roland Barthes,

"Myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things in it, things lose the memory that they were once made" - (*Mythologies*)

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