



SATYAVATI: THE UNCONQUERED MATRIARCH IN KAVITA KANE'S *THE FISHER QUEEN'S DYNASTY*

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Abstract

The Mahabharata has been supposed to be written thousands of years ago. Over the years the timeless epic has been retold, revisited, reviewed and revised from many scholars across the globe. These writers selected contemporary issues and applied those aspects while retelling the text. No doubt, most burning issues of the present world like women empowerment find a place in their writings. This paper deals with one such Mahabharata based novel, which is an autobiography of Satyavati. This article explores the presentation of the epic character Satyavati in Kavita Kane's *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* (2017). Its forefronts queen Satyavati as flesh and blood human beings like us. Being used epic as its background, Kane tries to foregrounding the conditions of women in a patriarchal society. It highlights the dominance theme of quest for women identity. The paper intends to explore the significant role played by Satyavati in shaping the plot and sequence of events in the novel. It also focuses on the journey of the protagonist from being mere fisher girl to the matriarch of the Kuru dynasty. Thus, it tries to bring forth how female observation of the epic varies from the male perception.

Key words: Women empowerment, retellings, foregrounding, women identity, perception.

Introduction

The great Indian epic, the Mahabharata, depicts several facets of life. This illustrates the position of women in the society of the time. There are many female characters in the Mahabharata, and some of them are

played significant roles in the political power struggle for the monarchy. Satyavati, a minor character from the Mahabharata greatly contributed to the establishment of the Hastinapur kingdom. She assisted her father in a rowing boat as a little girl by ferrying passengers across the river. She was the mother

of the famous sage Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharata and the Queen-mother of the Hastinapur dynasty. Though throughout her life, she took an active part to protect the throne, she was not portrayed prominently. But *Fisher Queen's Dynasty* her journey to womanhood and her challenges are very well justified.

Objective

Although Satyawati's tale was intriguing, it wasn't widely known, and she wasn't portrayed as a significant figure. Despite being the mother of the Mahabharata's author, her renowned sage son Vyasa always introduced himself in the name of Parasara's son Vyasa, his father. The wise sage always obeyed his mother and showed there when she needed him. Finally he only suggested her to follow practicing penance in the hermitage. After the funeral rites of Pandu, Vyasa speaks to his mother, "Mother, our days of happiness have gone by and days of calamity have succeeded. Sin beginneth to increase day by day. The world hath got old. The empire of the Kauravas will no longer endure because of wrong and oppression. Go thou then into the forest, and devote thyself to contemplation through Yoga". (Ganguli Adi Parva 128.266). The queen-mother Satyawati was powerful, but her life was tainted by suffering and hardship. This paper will attempt to examine Satyawati, an important figure from the Mahabharata, and how she overcame adversity to become an influential King-maker from a common boat-rower.

Methodology

Secondary sources are the foundation of the entire study. The primary source for this article is Kavita Kane's novel *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*. It also gathered some information on the Mahabharata in its original form with its explanatory notes. The writings of eminent experts that have appeared in books and knowledge-based magazines and journals are frequently used as references. The creative

writing of various authors also had a significant impact on this study as well. To make the study complete, references are gathered from a variety of sources websites.

Findings

The opening scene of the novel depicts Bhishma resting on his bed of arrows, reflecting on his life and mistakes. He ponders whether the past mistakes he made could have been prevented. The remainder of the narrative is told through flashbacks of Bhishma's life up till Satyawati decides to depart from Hastinapur. It becomes the well known the tale of Satyawati. However, not many people are aware of Satyawati's crucial contribution to determining Hastinapur's destiny. Kavita Kané delves further into this tale. Kane did an outstanding job of portraying Satyawati. Throughout the course of the book, she is able to convey her beauty, ambition, vulnerability, and pain. One must give the author credit for using this dialogue to reveal Satyawati's unrestrained ambition.

"I shall use my charms to get what I want. I cannot afford to have morals like the rich and the royal. The righteous would argue that it 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" (Kane, 2017, p.32).

The author also discusses the topic of sensuality. Her work does a good job of capturing the development and high drama of Shantanu and Satyawati's relationship. It seems that the idea of beauty at that time was unrelated to skin tone. She comes to life in front of the reader by the description of her body.

"She was very tall and sculpted, with the strength to man oeuvre the wooden boat in the choppy waters. She was dusky and ravishing with broad shoulders, a

provocative bust, a small waist, voluptuous hips and long legs which were taut and tense swaying with the movement of the boat as the fabric of her short cloth rode up her smooth thighs. Her thick dark hair rested loosely on her bare shoulders" (Kane, 2017, P.54).

She tactfully overcomes the palace and the people's resistance to accepting her as queen, and she has a great ability to tolerate it. She skillfully handled the internal conflicts between Bhishma and herself and the mysteries of royal existence. The ups and downs of Satyavati's fortunes and Bhishma's idealistic outlook, conflict between Satyavati and her descendants etc are challenging to her.

Queen Satyavati, the matriarch of the Kuru dynasty, tells the Mahabharata story in her perspective. Satyavati, a stunning fisherwoman, reportedly grabbed the attention of King Shantanu of Hastinapur. Satyavati's father requested that her offspring inherit the throne in place of Bhishma, the King's son from his first marriage, in exchange for his daughter's hand in marriage. Bhishma, ever the obedient son, gave up his claim to the kingdom and vowed to live a celibate life. These choices had a long-lasting effect on the dynasty since the Kauravas and the Pandavas, Queen Satyavati's grandchildren, fought fiercely for the throne in the Mahabharata War. It goes into the thoughts and feelings of the grand matriarch Queen Satyavati, who initiated a series of events that resulted in the Mahabharata, the epic struggle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas for succession.

Yojanagandha, Satyavati, Daseyi, Kali, and Matsyagandha, many names given to an abandoned child born through an illicit relationship. Abandonment of girl child by their parents is not a new matter. As A. S. Altekar (2014) points out, "In ancient times in all patriarchal societies, the birth of a girl was generally an unwelcome event. Almost everywhere the son was valued more than the

daughter. He was a permanent economic asset of the Family" (p.3). Discarded in favour of her fairer and more attractive twin brother, Satyavati, who was raised by the chief fisherman, discovers early on that her appearance can be both an asset and a burden. Kane has structured the story in such a way that Satyavati was ambitious to become a queen because of her father's abandonment.

After being seduced by a powerful rishi and receiving gifts for life, she realizes that the only way to escape poverty and her neighbors' lecherous gaze is to ensure that she becomes a queen. Kane describes the grudge of Satyavati in her own words "She detested the way the nobles and royalty lived their lives, while she was cursed to a life of hard work and stench, with no hope of ever bridging the gap" (Kane, 2017, p.10). Her fisherman father demands a terrible oath from the noble and brave heir prince Devavrata that he will renounce all claims to the throne and that only the children born out of his elderly father, Shantanu and the young Satyavati, would rule over Hastinapur. He will also be required to take the celibacy oath. Satyavati, who is distinctly concerned about the enormous sacrifices made by Devavrata, now known as Bhishma, must deal with the unrelenting enmity of the family, the nobles, the servants, and pretty much everyone else in the palace who despise her for taking Bhishma's rights.

The harsh criticism the general public directs at the new queen is enough to intimidate anyone, but not the ambitious woman who never loses her composure. Even when the heirs to the throne, Chitrangad and Virya, are born, the public is only marginally appeased by her subtly indicating that they are under the loving care of their much older stepbrother. *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* helps the modern reader understand once more how purity and chastity are concepts created by the society to serve its purpose. It makes us wonder why women seeking independence of thought and action is an unwelcome thing.

In Satyavati, there is a lot of justifiable anger. She was raised among the fishing village after being abandoned as a newborn and being denied her royal birth. Her furious inquiries witness her anger. "Why was I denied my right? I was born a princess. I am a king's daughter. Just like my brother who is now, I hear, the king of Matsya...He roams with shimmering golden fish flying aloft while I sell fish and ferry people"(Kane, 2017, p.31). Satyavati decides to do something about her great poverty and the fishy stench that adheres to her skin, thus her other name, Matsyagandha, which causes people to scrunch up their noses when she walks by. With the aid of the one weapon she possesses, her sensuality, she will rise to the position of queen. She uses it again to entice King Shantanu of Hastinapur into making her his queen after using it to obtain eternal youth and a seductive smell from a rishi. She did not find anything wrong as she firmly declared "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" (Kane, 2017, p.32). But she had no idea that pursuing her passion would cost her terribly.

Then there is Prince Devavrat, the son of Ganga and King Shantanu. He swears to be celibate in order to bring his father's happiness back, taking the horrible oath that would ultimately lead to the downfall of his beloved Hastinapur and earning the name Bhishma in the process. His stoic presence in her life acts as a constant reminder to Satyavati of how her actions devastated a man's life. Ironically, the person who was boiling with wrath over not getting the life she deserved ends up robbing someone else of their birthright. But she was determined to continue to rule whatever the situation may be as she said, "I will not be defeated. I have to find a way" (Kane, 2017, p.270).

Analysis

One can't love or hate the character Satyavati. She is a wily, crafty, and devious

woman whose main goal is to ensure that she and her sons inherit the throne of Hastinapur. She will stop at nothing to reach her ambition, even if it means taking countless lives in the process. Despite everything, one still feels sad for her rather than hatred. At the end of the day, Satyavati still feels the anguish of being cruelly abandoned by her own father and forced to endure the tribulations of poverty beneath the tough and cunning exterior. It is revealed by Kane that Satyavati's mother was not an apsara but rather Dasharaj's own sister, a fisherwoman. In order to maintain his reputation, King Vasu made up a tale about how she was born. As Pattanaik (2010) says, "The story of Uparichara's 'joyful spurt of semen' in the forest and its consumption by a fish is perhaps an elaborate tale to cover a king's indiscretion with a fisherwoman" (p.59).

She develops the belief that having power provides stability and that respect can only be earned through having power as she grows older. In order to achieve this she takes decision after decision, eventually end up destroying the entire dynasty. One such decision she forced Bhishma to abduct three princesses of Kashi with a political motive: "By marrying all three of them into Hastinapur, Kashi will be solely ours. If the three princesses marry three different suitors, we will be in conflict with them all our lives" (Kane, 2017, p.213). The rule stated that Satyavati should not compel her daughters-in-law, but she violated the rule since she was determined about carrying on the family legacy. She says, "They will have to obey me for the sake of the crown" (Kane, 2017, p.282).

However, by strengthening her daughters-in-law through this *niyog*, she was challenging the age old notion of patriarchy that men have a crucial role in the creation of offspring as in her words, "it is the women who give birth and create new life, a new hope, by perpetuating their family line, their dynasty, their clan, their race. Though men claim it to be theirs, in the name of patriarchy" (Kane, 2017,

p.284). The term “patriarchy” is defined by the feminist critic, V. Geeta (2009) as “a power system where male members in general and father figure in particular rule over the family and the society. It is not only the subordination of women, but the domination over the weaker section of the society including men”.

Even after becoming queen, she regrettably never receives the acceptance and respect she desired. She stole the authority of their beloved Prince Devavrat, and the people of Hastinapur will never forgive her. Her spouse, who is conflicted by what he done to his own son, doesn't either. Her name, Queen Daseyi, pokes fun at her lower-class origins. She raised her voice to this discrimination made to Vidur when she realized only Vidur was perfect but was rejected not be the king because of his low-born status as he was the son of a maid servant. Satyavati questioned this marginalization on the basis of class and caste, “Why can we not make new laws, new rules that break shackles, instead of changing us? If I fisher girl, could be queen, I shall see to it that a maid's son gets his rights!” (Kane, 2017, p.314).

Ironically, Bhishma is the only one who genuinely understands her. Despite the fact that they should both avoid or despise one another, they go looking for one another. Satyavati only had faith in and considers Bhishma to be her own, which explains her jealousy when Bhishma grows fond of Amba. The only one who is aware of her birth and the only one to defend her when her honour is in danger is Bhishma. Despite being their older brother in reality, he ends up becoming a co-parent to her sons.

Like us, Bhishma is torn between admiring and despising Satyavati's tenacity and drive. Despite the fact that she is his father's wife and younger than him, he respects her by calling her “mother”. The two, however, are also connected by their devotion and patriotism to Hastinapur. According to the Mahabharata, Bhishma was the only one with the ability to

stop the horrible Kurukshetra combat. Instead, he continues to do some horrendous things while remaining silent when he could have spoken up and put an end to it all. But he struggled merely to uphold the oath he made to Satyavati. She herself urges him to finally break the pledge, but he never does. He is therefore forced to observe the destruction of the entire Kuru generation.

Kane also succeeds in giving voices to other female characters that appear outside of the Mahabharata by skillfully fusing her own imagination with details from the original text. We know about Ganga, a lady who had to kill seven of her sons and who later divorced her husband and gave up her adolescent son. We meet the feisty Kripa, the Shantanu-adopted child who is never afraid to criticize Satyavati for destroying her adored brother's life. Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika, the three princesses Bhishma kidnapped on Satyavati's orders as wives for her sickly son, are also revealed. The most intriguing of the three is Amba's character; she is the most interesting and whose revenge marks Bhishma's downfall. (Mohanty. 2018) Thus, the novel imparts new insight on the great epic.

Sathyavati's far-sightedness, decision making ability, strength to implement her political standpoints, her methodologies for accomplishing objectives, her staunch desires are all given penetrating projection at the stunning authority of the Kuru dynasty. Hence, the character of Satyavati is full of hope, ambition, and determination. “Satyavati was brought up by a fisherman and was doing a menial job. But after becoming a Queen she proved her wisdom and ability. Bhishma respected her and consulted her on administrative and family matters. She was keen about the welfare of the kingdom, and setting aside her grief, took initiative in the continuation of her vanishing race” (Bhawalkar, 2002, p.389). She suffered a lot in her life time because of her aspiration to become a queen but she gained an esteem admiration in our hearts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is critical to stay on track and avoid getting sidetracked when reading Kavita Kane by the very vices that the author herself is attempting to rid us of, such as being judgmental. This would be ineffective since, unlike women, men and children can become victims of patriarchy. As a result, Kane through Satyavati combats gender inequality through raising awareness, which is unquestionably a prerequisite for the growth and development of women. Even though they all lived in a culture that was predominately male, the female character chosen by Kavita Kane never fully satisfied the needs of the men, according to an examination of her stories. Kane details the pitiful obstacles women had to overcome in order to pursue their ambition for knowledge and power in *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*. (Mondal, 2019) The main female character Satyavati's success in the novel sends a positive and rational message to people all around the world that their lives are in their hands and that they are capable of escaping any obstacles in their way if they have the will and bravery to succeed.

The novel expertly captures the growth and development of Satyavati's personality. She is portrayed as a powerful and self-reliant woman who can stand up for her own rights and make her own decisions. Her life is a tale of transformations, from a fisher girl to a queen, from Kali to Satyavati, from Matsyagandha to Yojanagandha. She made her own decisions and was successful in achieving those decisions. Satyavati was able to be rational, raise logical queries, and take part in conversations and arguments, debates and discussions. Satyavati "...had an important role in the life of the venerable Bhishm, and also as the mother of the great sage Vyasa who appears throughout in the Mahabharata as the most influential and highly revered adviser to the Kauravas and Pandavas whenever necessary" (Bhawalkar, 2002, p.397).

She rebelled against the patriarchal institution that insisted on the continuation of the line of the fathers with her passion to make her own progeny the king of Hastinapur and the plans she subsequently carried out to fulfill that ambition. Her transition from a fisher girl to a queen denotes her entry into a public space that is intended for men rather than women. Her perspective on women as creators is a major departure from traditional ideals.

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