



## Beyond the Patriarchal Gaze: Giving Voice to the Silenced in Kavita Kane's Menaka's Choice

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### Abstract

*The Indian mythology, with its immense nexus of legends, goddesses, and female divine beings, has a strong impact on the cultural and social landscape of the Indian subcontinent. These mythical tales have been cleverly re-formulated by the great scholar Kavita Kane who prefigures them by putting them in the vision of women. In her work she brings new views of the vagaries, desire and agency of the female protagonists. The treatise is a comprehensive review of Menaka's Choice (2016) by Kane, which questions the cultural values that keep reoccurring in the representation of women in the Indian mythopoetic tradition. The themes of female empowerment, self-realisation, and defiance on the conventional social norms are central to the inquiry and are carefully explored. The paper also reflects on the way this story echoes through the present-day Indian society, creating the discussion about gender equality, rights of women and reclaiming the female voice. Through the examination of the cultural mores and gender relations which are brought to life in the novel by Kane, the current article adds to our wider understanding of Indian writing, feminism as well as the central role which mythological narrations have in shaping the social understanding.*

**Keywords:** Mythology, Feminist Re-writing, Women's representation, Empowerment.

### Introduction

Myth is not only an antiquity of an archaic story passed down the generations; it is an advanced discourse that is combined with gods, heroes, supernatural beings, and symbolic figures. Very often such stories are attempts to explain the natural phenomena, reflect cultural beliefs, and teach moral lessons. In addition to this, they unify group identity and create community integrity through communal values. However, myths are not mere entertainment and even enlightenment, as they also reinforce social stratifications, which ranks the most glaring of all as the subordination of females. Despite the fact that there are mythical traditions that have traditionally confined women to their roles, a scholarly and cultural movement is gaining ground in an attempt to challenge and reshape the old forms of these myths. Feminist revisionist mythmaking redefines our interpretive paradigms in relation to mythology to highlight some long-footloose perspectives and stories that have been ignored. In this way, these reinterpretations provide new findings and inspire academic discourse related to the questions of gender, power, and equity. Rachel Blau Duplessis defines this

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method as ‘narrative displacement’ which occur when a well-known story is accepted and told from an alternative perspective. She elaborates:

By putting the female eye, ego, and voice at the center of the tale, dis-placement asks the kind of questions that certain feminist historians have, in parallel ways, put forth: How do events, selves, and grids for understanding look when viewed by a female subject (DuPlessis 109).

Revisionist mythmaking is radical repossession of female agency which challenges scholars and lay readers alike to be bold, fearless in their inquiries, and confrontational resilience in a dignified manner. In essence, this intellectual practice reformulates canonical myths, giving them a new life with the help of rehabilitating the marginalized feminine personas of antiquarian and mythological historiography. Revisionist writers shed light on the strength, wisdom and power of women pushed to the margins by questioning the established masculinist paradigm that historically overshadowed these stories. These female authors are attempting to subvert the nature of gender, re-telling legends to reinstate the action and input of women that has been squandered over centuries. Adrienne Rich in her article “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” defines re-vision as:

The act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society... We need to know the writing of the past... not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us (Rich 167).

Kavita Kane explains in an interview with Sayantani Chakravarty that she chose to write in the mythological genre because the genre offered a vast, timeless tableau a perfect environment in which to weave together modern conceptual interests. She intentionally prefigures the forgotten or sidelined women of Indian mythology in both of her novels, so that they have the primary relevance and their untold stories are recovered. This calculated choice of characters helps Kane reweave the old stories in a new context, thus casting their voices and experienced experience in a new light:

The spotlight on marginalized and minor characters can change the narrative. You can see them, hear them, and give them a voice to tell their version of the same story.... Women are marginalized at every level of society, trapped in repressive institutions by patriarchal domination and misogynistic assumptions. The male perspective is more dominating. But now the social attitude is revamped and archetypes changed definition too. There is a certain individualism with all the consequent political and social reorientations. There is a more collective tone emphasizing the sovereignty of women (Chakravarty).

Women writers comprehend the illusion of a timeless, unhistorical mythological pattern that comes to control reality. They consciously take up the task of revisionism by giving voice to silenced mythological figures and knit their own personal experiences in their narrative with the hope of bringing in a social change.

### **Literature Review**

Nisha Tyagi et al., in their paper “Rereading Minor Women Characters of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata through their Contemporary Adaptation in the Novels of Kavita Kane”, observe that in epic narratives, marginalised women have often been misrepresented, underrepresented, or silenced. Kane remodels these figures and presents them as heroes with their own ideation and stand against established social and cultural norms, thus fighting the gendered and class-based oppression of a male-dominated society. Through prefiguring the agency of the reimagined characters, Kane does not only disrupt the mainstream audience with the existing patriarchal narratives, but also highlights how feminist literary practice could be applied to alter the modern discourse.

B. Gnanam and G. "Kalvikkarasi, in Mythopoeic Renderings of "Kavita Kane: A Glimpse from a Feminist Perspective, suggest that the novels of Kane, namely, \*Lanka's Princess\*, (2017), (2016), 2019) are recreations of disliked women in Indian epics that reinvent them in sympathetic and dignified terms. Menaka in their feminist retelling has been made to seem as a sympathetic woman, and Ahalya as a humane. These stories upset the patriarchal gaze inherent in classical mythology, as mythological women in these stories are characters who are informed by their situations instead of being expressions of evil. Similarly, in the article, Retelling Feminine Sensibility in the Novels of Kavita Kane: A Critical Study by Mr. Nilesh Patel and Dr. Hitendra Kumar M., the authors argue that the books of Kavita Kane contain the feminine sensibility, revived forgotten female characters of Indian epics, and placed them in the context of revealing ancient and modern struggles. S. Gayathri, in “Retelling Epics in Feminine Perspective: An Emerging Trend in Reference with Kavita Kane: Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen”, notes that Kane's portrayal of Uruvi in Karna's Wife (2013) is completely different from her mythological portrayal.

A growing body of work examines *Menaka's Choice* in particular. Meenakshi and Kumar, use Foucault's concepts of docile bodies and organic individuality and explore how Kane disrupts conventional portrayals of Menaka by highlighting the apsara's resistance to the disciplinary systems that police female bodies. Hetal Meriya, in her paper “Archetypal Representation in Kavita Kane's Menaka's Choice,” highlights Menaka's heroic sacrifices. Kane depicts Menaka abandoning her love for Vishwamitra to enable his spiritual quest, which proves her devotion,

meditation, and reverence. The story of Menaka explains the larger tragedy of women of heaven that are under the control of the patriarch. In a 2023 research, Dodla Sai Kavyasree and Naidu focus on the transformation of a goddess, Menaka, who is a seductress into an independent woman with ambition and thus shows how she can escape the restrictions of the society and exercise her agency in the divine hierarchy dominated by men. All in all, these studies show that the reinterpretations of Kane not only give women historically sidelined by myth the right to speak, but also tell advanced, empowering narratives laced with the current feminist theory.

### **Menaka: The Celestial Nymph in Mythology**

The nymph Menaka is a very short and important character in the Ramayana of Valmiki, which had a significant impact on the plot of the epic. Her beauty and poise that are so ethereal are not just magical pleas that are aesthetic but instead symbolic of distractions that can even upset the most disciplined minds. The sage Vishwamitra (who was once a king who renounced his throne and undertook spiritual asceticism) goes on his way to severe penance; the gods, seeing his determination, send Menaka to check his constancy.

Vishwamitra is deeply meditating in his hermitage when Menaka enters the landscape which is spoiled by her alluring looks and graceful dance. Vishwamitra, though preoccupied at the beginning of his contemplative practice, is eventually seduced by her charms. Although he struggles to resist, his austerity breaks down and as a result, he develops a passionate relationship with Menaka, whose child, Shakuntala, ends up being born.

But with time, Vishwamitra comes to his senses and acknowledges the existence of Menaka as a divine agenda to test his commitment. He recognizes the essential role of his spiritual journey, he chooses to abandon both the nymph and their daughter, and he gets back to his ascetic life.

### **Menaka's Story Revised by Kavita Kane in *Menaka's Choice* (2016)**

Kavita Kane's portrayal of Menaka in *Menaka's Choice* (2016) offers a refreshing and empowering portrayal of the character as a strong, bold, and assertive individual. Unlike the conventional literary norms of passive or decorative archetypes of the protagonist, the character of the protagonist, Menaka, as described by Kane, is a demonstration of proactive resistance to the injustices of the system. Her determination and desire to challenge the established social norms demonstrate a strong inner strength which goes beyond physical strength and is a combination of inexorable spirit and unquestioned willingness to resist oppression. With such a subtle treatment Kane upsets all the conventional stereotypes,

depicting Menaka as a multi-layered character who acts both as a force of justice and a force of change in society. Menaka defies expectations, reclaims her power and asserts her own rights. She reminds readers that women can be powerful forces of transformation.

In the book, *Menaka's Choice* (2016), Kavita Kane shares the struggle of a woman conforming to patriarchal norms:

Menaka does not get liberated as Ahalya does in my respective books on them. But the story of Menaka is her selfless sacrifice which unfortunately is never recognized by our own myopic version of an apsara as a beautiful seductress. We don't see her as a lover, a wife, a mother, and overall, as a woman who battles for the dignity and respect she deserves (Sengupta and Gupta 344).

Menaka's remarkable courage shines through in her bold defiance of societal norms governing love and marriage. In ancient times, strict expectations were placed on women, especially apsaras. Patriarchal society limited and restricted their autonomy, personal desires and emotions. According to Indra, their sole duty was "to seduce mortals, those various kings, and ambitious rishis" (Kane 45). Yet, Menaka dares to defy this prescribed role by loving and later marrying Vishwavasu, the Gandharva king. Her helpless, true, devoted love for Vishwavasu is similar in intensity to the love Bahinabai Chaudhuri felt for her lover:

The desirous, desirous heart /Is like a pack of cattle in a field/No matter how much  
you drive it away/It comes back and settles on the crop/...God, what exactly is this heart  
How was it fashioned? /Did you dream of it? /While fully awake? (Bahinabai).

Mythology does not reveal the emotions experienced by Menaka but Kane (2016) reveals in detail the love life of Menaka and Vishwavasu, her first lover and husband. When Indra criticises Menaka for defying the rules, Menaka fearlessly defends her love for Vishwavasu, boldly proclaims her desires and her commitment to him:

I broke the boundaries set up by this world and favoured one man over others. I did it. I seduced him because I wanted him... I fell in love, o king of the devas, I couldn't help myself and I saw to it that Vishwavasu, your king of the Gandharvas, was as besotted with me - not just to have him, but to own him, to keep him forever. For that, I committed the next unthinkable crime- I married him! I had to. It was like a fever, burning me, consuming me and I wanted to live in this fire forever (Kane 16).

Menaka's strong and intelligent character comes to the fore when she discovers that Vishwavasu has been falsely accused of misconduct towards Rambha. Determined to seek justice for her husband, Menaka cleverly uses her wit and intelligence to prove his innocence. She provides compelling evidence to expose the false accusations orchestrated by Indra and others, that reveals their ulterior motives to separate her from Vishwavasu. Menaka fearlessly

confronts her own teacher, Tumburu. She acknowledges his indecent behaviour towards her and Tilottama in order to exonerate Vishwavasus. Her boldness and refusal to dance in the court until Vishwavasus's return highlights her strong devotion and her willingness to sacrifice her own desires for the sake of her loved one:

And if you cannot deliver justice to me and my expelled Vasu, then I announce right now, that I refuse to dance in this court till Vasu returns...My lord, I came here today in respect to your order to see me in court. From henceforth, I shall not attend this court, your royal orders or the expectations from me as a heavenly courtesan notwithstanding. You are not my king! (Kane 78)

Her constant support for Vishwavasus, even in the face of their expulsion from heaven, manifests her confidence and ability to manage difficult situations. Menaka and Vishwavasus's mutual support and love incite jealousy among others. When Indra pleads with Menaka to seduce Vishwamitra (Kaushik) on Earth, Menaka cynically criticises Indra for his manipulative plot to protect his Indralok. After rejecting Indra's plea multiple times, Menaka eventually agrees to go to Earth, not out of fear, but as an opportunity to escape from heaven. She consciously decides to approach Vishwamitra without assuming a false identity, without lies or pretence. She expresses her individuality and intelligence:

I shall introduce myself as who and what I am- Menaka, the banished apsara ... I shall convince him that I have been thrown out from Heaven by you as a punishment for having dared to love the Devagandharva Vishwavasus and sired a child from him. And how you cursed him and recount all what you did to extract all the needed sympathy...that way, there is no untruthfulness in my story (Kane 106).

Throughout the narrative, Menaka remains in control, and is never reduced to a weak or submissive figure. When Kama, God of Love, urges Menaka to return to heaven as per Lord Indra's order, Menaka firmly refuses to leave Kaushik. Later, when Indra comes to take Menaka back to heaven, she presents him with two options: either face a battle with Kaushik or leave Menaka with Kaushik to give birth to their child. Through this clever tactic, Menaka outwits Indra, ensuring that she can spend more time with Kaushik. She fearlessly confronts those in power, questions societal norms, and prioritizes her own happiness and the well-being of those she loves:

She allowed her words to sink in. She had played out well, goading him, enticing him though exaggerated promises and persuasion, and finally scaring him just enough to provoke him into agreeing with her. She had him completely in her grip, and she would twist him as necessary (Kane 159).

Menaka's greatness shines through as she confesses her seduction and even lies to Kaushik. She falsely claims to have grown bored with mundane life and lies that she feels burdened by motherhood. She does this in order to make her husband detest her and enable him to pursue his aspirations. Her decision to give priority of her husband's spiritual journey over her own



happiness and family life shows her dedication to a higher calling, that transcends the ordinary bonds of individual desires and aspirations: “Kaushik, go away from here, far away from me and this place, and seek your dream, and come back to me as a Brahmarishi” (Kane 169).

Her deeds are beyond the traditional ideas of sacrifice as they portray a sense of appreciation that true contentment lies not in the effort of seeking personal satisfaction but in the need to support the wellbeing of others.

The deep inner strength in her is shown by the fact that she continues to bear the burden of being separated with her husband and daughter just to do the greater good. Menaka's character is praised by Rishi Kanva for her strength, accountability, and responsibility. He recognises her as an apsara and Shakti— a source of strength and protection:

You loved and lost, but won in the end. One who participated in all the aspects of life, not as man's equal, but in fact superior to him. Vishwamitra might be the greatest rishi today, but he would not have been so were it not for you. You castigate yourself unfairly that you were the cause for his downfall. But you were also responsible for resurrecting him to his current glory (Kane 228).

Tragedy strikes Menaka when her daughter Pramadvarya succumbs to snakebite, as informed by the sage Sthulakesh. Menaka pleads with Yama, the god of death, to take her life and spare her daughter: “I am immortal’ she persisted. ‘I cannot be subjected to death, but I have enough years of life to donate to my daughter whom I bore from Vasu, an immortal as well” (Kane 91).

The maternal path that Menaka follows is marked with increased woes. During her later pregnancy to Sage Kaushik she faces an agonizing quandary which forces her to once more give up her child Shakuntala to facilitate her husband to reach the state of Brahmarishi. Divine power of immortality which Shakuntala did not possess does not allow Menaka to take her daughter to heavenly places.

This is a heart-wrenching severance, but Menaka loves him with the same undying constancy. She also frequently offers visits to the ashram of Rishi Kanva, according to which she peeks at her daughter and takes immense pride in the fearlessness, independence, and invincibility of Shakuntala. Menaka’s feelings for her children are in sync with the ideas shared by Simone De Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex*:

Children are a responsibility and an opportunity. Children are the loftiest blossoms upon the tree of untrammelled love...They are neither playthings nor tools for the fulfillment of parental needs or ungratified ambitions. Children are obligations; they should be brought up so as to become happy human beings (Beauvoir 537).

The behavior of Menaka can be viewed as an unwavering allegiance to justice since she portrays the willingness to address wrongful actions even to the people who have wronged her; when she shows her care and concern towards other men and women and fights injustice, this aspect becomes especially evident with Rambha. When Rambha hears that the penance of Vishwamitra was to be foiled, Menaka directly confronts Rambha, convincing her to stop being involved in the game of Indra at the same time revealing the hypocrisy of the divine king and asking why he did not see Rambha being punished after raping her or why he did not protect her against Ravana. To Menaka, she reminds Rambha of the fact that, being the king, Indra ought to have been able to protect the innocent and punish the culprits; she warns Rambha not to side with Indra as his yogi senses are too sharp to detect the pure intentions of Rambha:

It's a plea!' gushed Menaka. 'Vishwamitra's wrath is lethal. Don't try this game on him. He is already furious with Indra, and this time he won't spare him or anyone who hinders him. He is sure to curse you! You are not even taking Kama with you for protection!' (Kane 234)

Menaka's concern for Rambha's well-being and her voicing against the injustices depicts her compassionate nature and her commitment to justice.

### **Conclusion**

Kavita Kane depicts Menaka as a strong personality who supports the ideals which are proposed by Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (1997). De Beauvoir considers the vision of Rimbaud and she insinuates that a real liberation of women would be achieved when they are not limited by social factors and that they live out of their own choices. Menaka portrays this emancipation, she is really strong, intelligent and courageous as she does not follow the roles she is given. Along her way, she goes against the patriarchal rules and struggles to make her points. In that way, she slowly becomes a representation of empowerment. Her strategy and decisions, which are based on her desires and beliefs, demonstrate her invocation of individual agency and personal liberty. Being an apsara, Menaka surpasses the conventional frames of expectation, proves her right to control her own fate and make other people follow her example.

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