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## Power, Agency and Legacy: A Feminist Study of Satyavati in Kavita Kane's Retelling of the *Mahabharata* in *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*

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### Abstract

This present research paper delves into the character of Satyavati, a pivotal figure in the Indian epic the Mahabharata, through the study of Kavita Kane's **The Fisher Queen's Dynasty**. By uncovering the layers of her character, the present paper makes an attempt to re-visit the ancient Indian epic the **Mahabharata** with a contemporary feminist perspective. The selected novel offers a nuanced portrayal of Satyavati, exemplifying her quest for identity within the patriarchal framework of the epic and projecting her as an ambitious and powerful woman. The paper strives to study the distinctive characteristics of feminism, as getting reflected through this deeply-rooted-in-our-tradition character Satyavati and contribute to the Indian flavour of the feminist movement. The paper underscores the importance of re-evaluating mythological figures to reflect diverse viewpoints and promote a more inclusive historical discourse. Through this study, the paper awakens the readers and influences them to study the traditional narratives in modern contexts.

**Keywords:** feminism, identity, Indian perspective, Empowerment, Self-Assertion, Self-Esteem etc.

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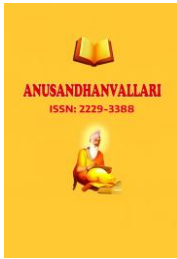
### Introduction:

Indian mythology, particularly the two great epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, serve as invaluable treasures that reflect the rich traditions and culture of India. Their profound influence is evident in the numerous re-writings and re-tellings of these works in contemporary Indian literature in English. This practice, rightly stated by Sahasrabudhe (in Gupte 2019), “underscores the fundamental approach of Indians towards the journey of our civilisation, which is *Nitya nootan, Chir puratan, or continuity with change*” (p. iii).

More enticing and fascinating than the other, the *Mahabharata* has been retold numerous times, each time presenting a unique perspective. Among the retellings of the *Mahabharata*, Kavita Kane's *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, the one from Satyavati's point of view, is promisingly more intriguing, as it unfolds the story through one of the marginalised characters from the great epic. The present paper makes an attempt to revisit the *Mahabharata* from a new perspective i.e. the feminist perspective through the study of the portrayal of Satyavati in *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* by Kavita Kane.

### Aims and Objectives:

1. To study the evolution of Satyavati's character and identify the feminist qualities through the analysis of the select novel



2. To analyse if the notion of Indian feminism has its own flavour that is distinct from the western idea of feminism
3. To underscore the significance of studying the retellings of the Indian mythological work such as the *Mahabharata* from the contemporary perspective

### Literature Review:

Satyavati, a pivotal character in the *Mahabharata*, is often overshadowed by prominent male figures from the epic like Arjun, Bhishma etc and also other female characters like Gandhari, Kunti and Draupadi. The present section explores the traditional and contemporary perspectives on Satyavati and also throws light upon the research carried out in the same area.

In the *Mahabharata*, Satyavati is introduced as the daughter of a fisherman, who becomes the Queen of Hastinapur and also secures a promise from the King Shantanu that her children will inherit the throne. She has been projected as a lady with a strategic mind and was considered the ultimate reason for Bishma's vow of celibacy. However, this ancient narrative typically emphasises her role in the broader narrative and does not delve into her personal motivations and struggle.

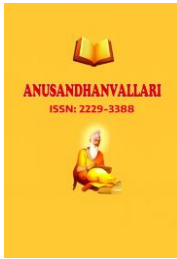
Bhattacharya (2004) refers to the works like Harivamsa and Aryashastra and presents his study of Kunti and Satyavati as reflected in some of the versions of the Mahabharata. Nisha (2018) makes an attempt to study the strengths and weaknesses of Satyavati's character. Verma (2020) presents the dynamics of motherhood through the case analysis of Satyavati, Kunti and Gandhari and calls Satyavati the 'most ambitious woman in the text' (p.59). Beena (2016) presents a feminist study of Sharath Kommaraju's novel *The Winds of Hastinapur* and Satyavati's journey towards empowerment. Utkarsh Patel's *Satyavati* (2019) is another intriguing novel which presents Satyavati's unexplored world. Ghosh (2020) also projects 'Satyavati's sublimation from deprivation towards empowerment in the play of power and politics' (p. 3350). Mondal and Lavanya (2019) and Pathak and Mishra (2024) elucidate Satyavati's transformation from being mere fisherwomen to the queen of Hastinapur and the significant role Satyavati played in shaping the plot and subsequent events in the story of the epic as presented in Kavita Kane's *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*.

There are researchers like Dawar (Reference no.2, 2021) and Ayer (2006) who have presented Satyavati with the negative traits predominant more than the positive ones. Dawar (Reference no.2, 2021) calls her 'femme fatale' meaning a woman like a beast who is generally attractive but mysterious and is insensible and indifferent. Ayer (2006) is also of the opinion that "Satyavati's story teaches the new generation women that determination and commitment are different from avarice and calculation. One should know where greed takes over from ambition."

The present study underscores the significance of studying the marginalised mythological female characters from the Mahabharata to read and comprehend the Mahabharata from a different perspective. An attempt would also be made to delve into these works with a feminist approach and bring into notice the distinctive Indian characteristics of Feminism.

### Theoretical Framework:

*The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* by Kavita Kane is the contemporary retelling of the *Mahabharata* that gives a voice to Satyavati and presents the narrative of the epic from her perspective. The present paper is an attempt to analyse how the novel projects her as a feminist, who fights for her rights, believes in equality and establishes her distinct identity in the world of men.



In the selected novel, Satyavati is brought to the forefront and presents her story- the story of her struggle, her ambitions and her journey towards self-empowerment. The feminist theory surely provides a framework to analyse the novel from a female's perspective and share the observations that would compel the readers to study the epic like the *Mahabharata* through a distinct lens, a woman's lens.

Mohanty (1988) rightly points out that the Western feminist ideas function as the norm against which the situation in the developing world is evaluated. The present study aims to apply the theory of intersectional feminism to the selected novel, which examines how different aspects of a person's identity- such as gender, caste, class etc.- intersect and create an experience of oppression and privilege. The paper also would like to determine the applicability of the postcolonial theory of feminism which critiques the dominance of Western feminist perspectives and emphasises the importance of cultural or social contexts in comprehending the characters.

#### **Methodology:**

For the present study, the feminist analysis will solely be dependent on the secondary data available on the topic i.e. the analysis of the retelling of the *Mahabharata* in *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* by Kavita Kane. Scholarly articles, critical essays and literary works have also been studied which present the nuanced portrayal of Satyavati as an empowered woman.

#### **Kavita Kane's *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty***

During one of her interviews, Kane talks about her inspiration for choosing mythological works to write novels. For her, "They are not old tales or legends, they extrapolate aspects of one's life, supplying symbols and analogies that carry forward and celebrate the human spirit yet bringing out the counteracting human inadequacies. It is not about godliness but humanity that mythology talks about" (Web Reference no. 3). The present novel i.e. *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* by Kavita Kane also presents to the readers Satyavati with all her virtues as well as flaws. The novel revolves around her and presents her journey from 'quest for identity' to 'an empowered woman'.

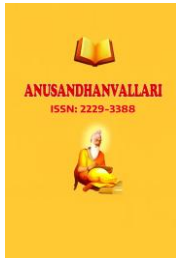
#### **A Feminist Analysis of Satyavati's Character through the Study of *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty***

##### **Satyavati's Childhood: Expressing Anger against Marginalisation:**

One of the notable characteristics of the novel is that Satyavati and Bhishm's life incidents are shared simultaneously and sometimes are interwoven too. It is felt that the narrative choice made by the author is deliberate, as it positions Satyavati at an equal level by sharing the life story of both Bhishm and Satyavati together, giving her equal importance.

The prologue of the novel has Bhishm contemplating on his past, specifically thinking about how he had a crucial impact on the lives of women around him, one of them is Satyavati. The first chapter 'The Birth' not only presents the birth story of Satyavati, but also throws light upon Devavrat's (Bhishm's) birth too.

The second chapter of the novel 'The Fisher Girl' presents Satyavati's childhood and how she is marginalised in the societal and patriarchal set up. The novel depicts the social circumstances Satyavati is a part of and critiques the treatment Satyavati receives in the male-dominated society. She could see the disdain in the eyes of her villagers because of the smell of fish to her body and thus known as *Mastyagandha* also called 'Kali' (Kane, 2017). She feels suffocated due to the atmosphere of discrimination around. She would feel hatred and disappointment for her father who abandoned her because she is a girl, and a dark-skinned girl too. The episode



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throws light upon the treatment women get in a patriarchal set up. The episode exemplifies **intersectional feminism**, highlighting how Satyavati experiences multiple layers of marginalisation- firstly being a woman and secondly her dark complexion and the smell, and thirdly her status in her society.

#### **Satyavati's Meeting with Sage Parashar:**

The novel intriguingly presents the meeting between Sage Parashar and Satyavati, one of the most crucial episodes that turns the course of the novel and projects Satyavati as a woman with **self-awareness, self-esteem and self-assertion**.

It is the first time that someone finds Satyavati attractive or beautiful and thus not able to understand how to react. Satyavati tries to keep her composure and does not accept her will instantly. Through her witty yet justifiable and logical arguments, Satyavati turns the whole incident in her favour. She is transformed from '*Matsyagandha*' to '*Yojangandha*' (the girl whose aroma can be felt across *yojanas* [8 miles distance]). Satyavati also takes a promise from the sage to restore her **virginity- another factor that has always been used as a parameter of judgement or evaluation of a woman's worth in a society**.

The present episode exemplifies Satyavati's awareness of her strengths, her self-assertion and her ability to put forth her points logically. Satyavati raises her voice against the marginalisation and believes in equality. Satyavati states, "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" (p.32, Kane, 2017). The present episode can be seen as an instance of both intersectional and postcolonial feminism, as the impact of Indian culture on the demands sought after is clearly visible. Satyavati's self assertion for establishing her own identity and not accepting the patriarchal norms is quite evident when she promises herself that she would not be like her mother- helpless, surrendering. "She would not allow herself to be used, never again..." (p. 39, Kane, 2017).

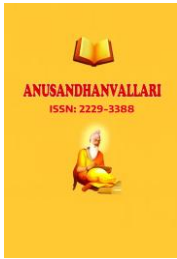
#### **Satyavati's Marriage with King Shantanu: Her journey towards Empowerment:**

Satyavati's meeting with king Shantanu is another episode from the novel that shows **her unshakable faith in herself and her ambitious behaviour**. The novel throws light upon the traditional mindset of the people in the society, especially men, when it comes to the perception of beauty and Satyavati's determinant demeanour not to accept those ways of thinking.

Everyone in the village likes Satyavati at present. Even it is her physical beauty that attracts king Shantanu too. However, she does not respond to his interest hastily. When Shantanu proposes to Satyavati for marriage, Satyavati asks him to meet her father (as in Kane, 2017) Dashraj. Dashraj, well aware of the dejection Satyavati experienced after her birth, decides to give everything to Satyavati that she deserves. The novel shows Satyavati remaining silent, though in shock, to the conditions laid down upon by Dashraj. Satyavati too, is determined to be treated 'not like a queen' but 'as a queen' herself (p. 67, Kane, 2017). Prince Devavrat takes the oath of celibacy for her father and assures both Dashraj and Satyavati the place in the royal lineage.

#### **Satyavati as a Queen:**

Kane's novel shares an in-depth narration of Satyavati's transition from a mere fisher girl to the Queen of Hastinapur. **Her struggle for establishing her identity** as a Queen- not with the authority only, but by winning the hearts of the people- has been beautifully presented in Kane's novel. Due to Bhishm's oath of celibacy, the subjects of the kingdom are not ready to accept her as **their queen**. "*But one day, they will chant my name in the*



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same breath... Once I become the queen, they will have to acknowledge me as their sovereign saviour, too..." (p. 97, Kane, 2017), she promises to herself. The statement proves Satyavati's strong will power. **The hatred of the subjects of the kingdom also proves to be an example of intersectional marginalisation, as Satyavati is not only marginalised due to her background, but also as a woman in a patriarchal set up.**

The admiration for Satyavati as a queen is also evident in the way Bhishm appreciates her. He has long back realised that she is a woman of great strength. "Be it because of her initial hardships or her innate nature, Bhishm had long realized that Satyavati was unrelenting, especially when it came to asserting her authority. Essentially unsentimental, she was someone who could plan ahead dispassionately, while setting her grief aside" (p. 209, Kane, 2017).

The novel intends to portray the strong side of Satyavati- her resilience, perseverance, never-say-die spirit, her integrity and commitment towards the service of the throne of Hastinapur - these qualities have always been highlighted making her a feminist. Satyavati is seen taking over main positions or roles in the male-dominated society and looking after and looking into the administration and politics of the kingdom. It is to be noted that she has a very good understanding of each of those roles and performs them with clarity and conviction. **And thus, she successfully establishes her identity as a queen, not Kali anymore.**

#### **Satyavati and Shantanu: Reflecting upon Their Life:**

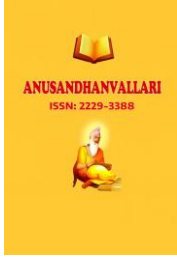
Satyavati's marriage with king Shantanu does not bring happy days in Satyavati's life, as she might have expected. Shantanu does not blame only himself, but she is blamed for Bhishm's oath of celibacy. As a result, the interactions between the two take the form of arguments many times. Satyavati calls Shantanu 'a debauched moralist' (p. 165, Kane, 2017) and reminds him that all are his choices, and not her decisions. Satyavati, thus, is presented as a woman who will not accept anything submissively. Rather, she will always dare to oppose and present her point of view fearlessly.

#### **The Dutiful Satyavati:**

Kavita Kane's novel *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* projects Satyavati's strategic decision-making, as she performs her role of a queen. Her elder son Chitravirya's death before marriage and Vichitravirya's death after marriage profoundly impacts Satyavati, leaving her grappling with grief of loss and the fear of uncertainty without a direct heir to the throne. However, the dutiful Satyavati prioritises the future of the kingdom over the self-imposed ethics and dares to ask Bhishm to break his oath and marry the two widows. When Bhishm refuses the proposal, Satyavati comes up with the idea of *Niyog*. Well versed with the scriptures and the '*shastras*', Satyavati has always shown the way, given a direction to move ahead in life. The male-dominated society perceives her decision as selfish. However, she questions, "If men could use women, why couldn't it be the other way round?" (p. 136, Kane, 2017). In this way, **the novel portrays Satyavati as one, who raises voice against the set norms of the society and strives for equality.**

Even Satyavati's interaction with Ambika and Ambalika (Vichitravirya's wives) to persuade them for the '*niyog*' shows her pride in the feminine strengths. "See it differently, not as a duty, not as coercion, not as a victim, but a victory- that you will be able to have a baby... See it as a power, a choice, to have a child" (p. 301, Kane, 2017), she says to Ambika. **The statement indicates Satyavati's optimistic approach and positive acknowledgement of the feminine strengths.**

Satyavati's meeting with Krishna Dwaipayana i.e. Vyasa (her first son) has been beautifully portrayed in the novel, showcasing Satyavati's ability to take the responsibility of her own actions and never regretting them. **"What is**



**endearing about her is that she sees her follies and willingly accepts them but never does she play a victim. She singularly takes responsibility of her choices and her actions, no matter what the outcomes are”,** Beena states rightly (p. 198, 2016).

The novel depicts Vyasa practising *niyog* with Ambika, Ambalika and Shudri (Ambika’s maid) and the birth of Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidur. These episodes highlight the interactions between the women in the palace and give a voice to their sufferings and injustice experienced. However, Satyavati manages to control the despair of the widow queens, letting them realise the necessity of this activity and their duty towards the throne. Satyavati (in Kane, 2017) feels pity for the maid’s child “not because he was handsome and healthy, but he was destiny’s unfortunate child” (p. 310, Kane, 2017). **Satyavati, known for head-strong demeanour, is also shown with such feminine qualities- love, care, concern and consideration.**

As stated earlier, Kane presents Satyavati to the readers by involving her participation in various incidents from the *Mahabharata*. Mondal and Lavanya (2019) rightly stated that “**Kavita Kane presented her in such a way that she no longer remained an insignificant character rather became the leading female protagonist who contributed to the Kurukshetra war to a large extent**” (p. 300, 2019).

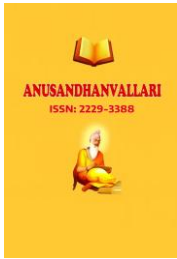
### **The Epilogue:**

The novel ends with an epilogue, where Satyavati is shown reflecting upon her actions and decisions. Kane has done it simultaneously too in the novel, as the narrative progresses. After Pandu’s death, Kunti comes to Hastinapur with the Pandavas (the children of Pandu) and the rivalry between the Pandavas and Kauravas (Dritarashtra’s hundred sons) becomes stronger and more dangerous. She is reminded of Vyasa’s prophecy that the Pandavas and Kauravas would destroy each other. Satyavati also realises what she has lost in the various battles of life and her incapability to bear more loss. She decides to go into the forest, leaving everything behind. The epilogue shows Satyavati surrendering herself into nature (River Ganga) after apologising for all the wrong decisions she took in her life. Salunkhe (2003), while sharing his views about Satyavati, expresses sympathy for her personal losses. He states, “सत्यवतीच्या वाट्याला मोठे वैभव, मोठा गौरव आणि मोठी सत्ता हे सर्व आले, तरी जीवनाच्या प्रवासात तिलाही खूप वेदना भोगावी लागली, यात शंका नाही” (p. 105). [Translation- Although Satyavati gained great wealth, immense honour and significant power, there is no doubt that she had to endure so much pain throughout her life].

To summarise, the novel *The Fisher Queen’s Dynasty* by Kavita Kane presents Satyavati as an ambitious woman, who fights against the patriarchal norms and succeeds in establishing her strong identity amidst the world of men. **She is a feminist who showcases the qualities like rage against marginalisation, resilience, self-awareness, self-assertion, self-esteem, quest for identity, struggle and perseverance for empowerment and most importantly a feminist with feminine sensibility.** As stated earlier in the paper, the feminist traits of Satyavati’s character resemble the intersectional and postcolonial feminism- where her thought processes are the outcome of the socio-cultural aspects too

### ***The Fisher Queen’s Dynasty* by Kavita Kane: The Distinct Flavour of Indian Feminism**

There are many qualities of Satyavati that bring her close to the Western idea of feminism. However, it can not be denied that the character has its distinct flavour- the Indian flavour of feminism. Though ambitious, Satyavati has kept her personal gains aside and focused on the well being of the people around her. Therefore, it is felt that the Indian philosophy of feminism is a distinct philosophy which presents the sacrifices, sufferings of women as their strengths. Her sufferings and sacrifices also make her a strong woman, a woman who can accomplish anything for the good of others.



Satyavati, as presented in the selected novel, comes out to be a strong woman- not only because she opposes patriarchy, she fights for her rights; but also because she is known for ability to accept both her flaws and weaknesses. The novel presents her sufferings and shows how she rises above all the adversities in her life and becomes stronger every time. The only motto that she lived for the well being of the Hastinapur kingdom and she served the throne wholeheartedly and dedicatedly expecting nothing for herself out of this service. Most importantly, she has accepted all her decisions and herself positively and is presented in a similar fashion in the novel. Therefore, she proves to be one of the greatest Indian heroines of all times, representing the Indian perception of feminism. In Sahasrabuddhe's (in Gupte 2019) words, "Traditionally, this approach could be described as a feminist approach, but, in fact, it is a humanist approach; an approach that calls for withering of the walls, meeting of minds and leading to integration through ideas and insights" (p. iii).

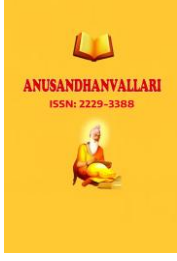
### Conclusion:

Studying the great epics like the *Mahabharata* through the retellings of the epic, as in '*The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*' by Kavita Kane, offers great insights into the complexities of gender roles and the social dynamics. Ambewadikar (2017) states that "The women like Satyavati, Gandhari, Kunti and Draupadi gave lessons on politics, statecraft, diplomacy and war in the times of need. They were part of the court functioning and were not just sitting behind and watching their men doing something. Women were powerful, influential, decision-makers, or director of events and decided the fate of men and their generations to follow". This underscores the importance of revisiting epics that enables the readers to recognise the timelessness of such great works, their relevance in today's time and the enjoyable process of reading giving a fresh perspective (especially a female's perspective) to study them.

The present paper, thus, is an attempt to contribute in the same direction with the hope that the research carried out in this study will encourage more scholars to delve into our rich historical and cultural heritage and enhance our understanding with each exploration.

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