

## **ANDROCENTRIC ENCODING AND CONCEPTUALIZING THE WOMEN IN KAVITA KANE'S RAMAYANA-BASED NOVELS**

**<sup>1</sup>Sarika Chandran**

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English/ School of Liberal Arts and Special Education,  
Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, Krishnankoil, Virudhunagar-626126.

**<sup>2</sup>Dr. S Rema Devi**

Associate Professor and Head, Department of English/ School of Liberal Arts and Special  
Education, Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, Krishnankoil, Virudhunagar -  
626126.

### **Abstract**

The enduring impact of the Ramayana on the Indian psyche is immeasurable, leaving an indelible mark with its timeless allure. Despite its ancient roots, the epic remains a dynamic force in the lives of the Indian people, seamlessly woven into the very fabric of their existence. The narrative of the Ramayana has captivated both erudite intellectuals and humble villagers, nurturing a shared cultural heritage of valorous traditions and ethical living. Even today, numerous Indians hold the tales of their ancient epics in high esteem. Symbolizing the essence of Indian ethos, the Ramayana is intricately linked to the nation's social history. This tradition has not only endured but thrived, offering a reservoir of profound insights capable of elevating ordinary lives to realms of enlightenment and righteous living. The epic presents an optimistic panorama of Indian life, resisting the erosive effects of time while continually influencing and enriching India's literary tradition. Writers throughout the centuries have articulated their unique perspectives on the narrative, shaped by contemporary circumstances, societal roles, intellectual inclinations, religious beliefs, and socio-political outlooks. The diverse interpretations, adaptations, and versions of the Ramayana mirror the evolving perspectives of their respective eras. This study aims to elucidate the varied impressions of the Ramayana in Indian English literature, examining how its themes and characters are reimagined, interpreted, and transposed in diverse human contexts. The research seeks to unveil the psycho-social reflections inherent in these adaptations, exploring how poets have employed the epic's archetypes and myths as symbolic representations of various facets of life and human nature in a contemporary setting. In doing so, the study endeavors to render the age-old theme of the ancient epic relevant to the intricacies of contemporary human existence.

**KEYWORDS-** Women; Female Struggles; Dilemma's; Resurgence; Objectification; Education; Oppression; Dearth of Choice; Social exclusion; Identity crises;

### **Introduction**

The artistic expressions of Indian English writers have been enriched by the Ramayana, contributing significantly to the vastness and significance of Indian English literature. Exploring the thriving history of India becomes imperative for anyone seeking a profound understanding of

the nation's essence. To truly comprehend a nation's existence, one cannot overlook its history and cultural heritage. Delving into the great epics reveals the traditional characteristics of Indian civilization, exposing both its magnanimity and deficiencies. The widespread popularity of the Rama story echoes across India, resonating with pleasure and piety in palaces as well as hovels. Fr. C. Blucke aptly asserts that the popularity of the Valmiki Ramayana and the extensive Rama-Literature over centuries stands as a testament to India's idealism, moral values, and belief in the triumph of good over evil. Similarly, the fervent response of millions to the message of Ramacaritamanasa attests to India's deep-seated religious belief and spontaneous piety.

The role and significance of women in the Indian community have undergone transformations over time. Hinduism, too, reflects these changes from ancient to early medieval times, with a discernible decline in women's freedom within families and society. Kavita Kane, inspired by the often overlooked mythological women characters, has carved a niche for herself in the realm of writers obsessed with mythology. Her distinctive approach lies in focusing on women who are marginalized, misunderstood, misrepresented, and abused in mythologies. Kane's work serves as a powerful voice against patriarchal traditions, providing a cathartic narrative for a community victimized by such norms.

In her novel "Sita's Sister," Urmila assumes various roles – a sister, daughter, wife, and more – but what stands out is her strength and ability to navigate every situation with finesse. Urmila's journey becomes an allegorical search for individual identity beyond being merely Sita's sister or Lakshman's wife. Kane reimagines Urmila as a woman of many dimensions – a scholar, an artist, and a pivotal figure holding everyone together. The novel introduces a feminist undertone to Urmila's unheard voice, challenging patriarchal norms and redefining her position.

Urmila emerges as a modern woman in Kane's portrayal, displaying strength, intelligence, and a sharp mind. Her pursuit of knowledge, intellectual engagements, and defiance of gender stereotypes set her apart. Kane's Urmila actively participates in state affairs, challenges patriarchal notions, and questions established power structures. Her courageous and fearless nature is evident in various instances where she becomes a protector of her loved ones. Urmila's choices and actions reflect a conscious effort to break away from traditional gender roles.

Kane's portrayal of Urmila as a feminist figure extends beyond mere passive sacrifice. Urmila actively engages with life, making conscious decisions and charting her own course. Kane's Urmila, unlike traditional portrayals, is not defined solely by her relationships but by her individual pursuits, intellectual vigor, and unwavering strength. The novel serves as a feminist narrative, questioning societal norms and empowering its female characters.

The struggles faced by women, as depicted in the novel, find their roots in ancient times. The Rig Vedic period granted women more freedom, but subsequent eras witnessed a gradual decline in their status. Foreign invasions, religious practices, and societal norms further subjugated Indian women. However, historical periods like the Mughal era and the subsequent influence of British colonialism played roles in shaping and reshaping women's status in Indian society.

Urmila, as presented by Kavita Kane, becomes a symbol of resistance within the patriarchal and male-dominated order of her time. Her journey encompasses physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions. Urmila's resistance takes the form of persistent questioning, challenging traditional notions of duty, loyalty, and morality. Through her character, Kane explores feminist perspectives, showcasing the strength, courage, and resilience of women against societal constraints.

Kane's portrayal of Urmila reclaims an unsung and forgotten character, offering a contemporary and feminist perspective. Urmila's quest for identity, intellectual exploration, and resistance against patriarchal norms make her a real and relatable woman. In Kane's narrative, Urmila's choices and actions become a source of strength for other women, challenging the institution of patriarchy. The novel becomes a layered representation of Urmila's identity – an intelligent, assertive, and sensible woman who navigates through societal constraints to define herself on her own terms. Kane's Urmila stands as a beacon of courage, conviction, and empowerment in the face of adversity.

### **Menakas Choice**

Kavita Kane's 'Menaka's Choice' unfolds the tale of a celestial nymph, born amidst the cosmic churn of the ocean by asuras and devas. Recognized as one of the most beautiful heavenly apsaras, Menaka's journey takes a twist when, according to mythologies, she is sent to Earth by Indra to disrupt the meditation of the rishi, Vishwamithra. Kane skillfully navigates the intricate details of the Mahabharata by narrating the story from Menaka's perspective, portraying her not merely as an apsara but as a strong, courageous, and intelligent woman.

In Hindu mythology, the prevailing notion of woman as the second creation, originating from Vedic times, continues to influence Indian societal perceptions. Kane, in an interview about 'Menaka's Choice,' critiques the unidimensional portrayal of women in traditional stories, emphasizing the lack of association between courage and sacrifice with characters like Menaka. Kane's narrative challenges these entrenched beliefs by presenting Menaka from a woman's viewpoint, a recurring theme in her novels that focuses on elevating underestimated women characters in epics.

The paradoxical title, 'Menaka's Choice,' underscores Menaka's lack of agency, compelled to obey the orders of Lord Indra. Despite being the most intelligent among the apsaras, she finds herself unable to break free from Indra's clutches and the designated life in Indralok. Her pursuit of a happy life with Vishwavasud is thwarted by Indra's envy, leading to his banishment and subsequent transformation into a monstrous figure on Earth.

Menaka's acceptance of Indra's plan to seduce Vishwamitra is driven by her desire to liberate herself from Indra and Indralok. She finds solace in battling for justice and dignity, not just for herself but as a representation of the untold grief of women in patriarchal societies. The narrative extends to Menaka's sacrifices, including the abandonment of her family on Earth to rejoin the immortals at Indralok, and her readiness to sacrifice her immortality for the sake of her daughter, Premavada.

Through the character of Menaka, Kane explores themes of independence, assertiveness, and accountability. Menaka emerges as a woman who actively shapes her destiny, challenging traditional portrayals as an apsara, seductress, and deceiver. Kane's attention to detail spans from Menaka's birth to her interactions with sage Kanva, highlighting her resilience and the quest for an alternative.

In an interview with *The Hindu*, Kane articulates the contemporary relevance of mythology, suggesting that myths reflect socio-cultural ethos and can be used to contemporize issues in today's world. 'Menaka's Choice' stands out as one of Kane's noteworthy novels, shedding light on male supremacy and drawing women from the periphery to the center. The retellings by modern writers, without relying on shape-shifting devices and magic, demystify gender conventions and the myths of the Vedic period, emphasizing the significance of 'peripherals and silent catalysts' in the narratives."

### **Lanka's Princess**

Kavita Kane's narrative retellings serve as a platform for exploring the marginalized predicaments of mythological female characters. Her exploration of the inner world, frustrations, and internal storms intensifies the challenges faced by these marginalized figures in her retelling works. This commitment to enfranchising marginalized mythological female characters is a consistent theme across Kane's body of work.

In *Lanka's Princess*, for example, Kane provides a voice to a character who has been historically ridiculed - Shurpanakha, a dark asura ogress/woman and the notorious sister of Ravana. Traditionally perceived as a hideous monster, Shurpanakha's story takes a new perspective. The conflict begins with Lakshman cutting off her nose, leading to her transformation from a seductive fish-shaped girl named Meenakshi to the vengeful demoness Shurpanakha. Her marriage to demon prince Vidyutjihva and subsequent revenge for her husband's death add layers to her character.

Kane skillfully weaves a variety of characters from the epic Ramayana and fiction into the narrative, including Ravana, Sita, Ram, Lakshman, Kaikaeyi, Kumbha, Vibhishana, and others. Shurpanakha's motivations, goals, revenge, and emotions become central to the story. Kane presents Ravana not just as an evil antagonist but as a caring brother who values his sister's happiness.

The book's protagonist and antagonist are symbolically represented by Lord Krishna, and supporting characters such as Vidyutjihva and the sons of Ravana contribute to the overall plot. Kane's decision to narrate events from the women's perspective enhances the artistic creation, allowing viewers to perceive the truth behind Shurpanakha's character.

The use of italics serves as a tool to break monotony and indicate the character's thoughts. An excerpt from the book exemplifies Shurpanakha's resolve: 'I shall have killed, even if it meant the annihilation of my family, this place, this kingdom, and my race. He and they all have made me suffer as I had never thought it was possible to suffer. Her heart was slamming against her ribs. I would do it, I would, she told herself' (Kane, 214).

This retelling serves as a powerful illustration, giving a voice to the voiceless and shedding light on a character often misconceived as a symbol of hatred and war. It becomes essential reading for those seeking a nuanced understanding of the feminine psychology of Shurpanakha. Kane captivates readers by introducing a female perspective into the alternate mythology genre, enriching the narrative with heart and soul.

### **Ahalya's Awakening**

Ahalya, known as 'the beautiful one without blemishes' (Kane 08), was born alongside her twin brother Divodas and shared a close bond with her parents, King Mudgal and Queen Nalayani. From her early years, she displayed a keen interest in acquiring knowledge and scholarly wisdom. Marriage held no allure for her, and her ambition extended beyond the confines of the palace. She voiced her aspirations, stating, "I can't remain in the palace and acquire the knowledge of the world. I don't want to be some cloistered princess who just looks pretty and does nothing" (Kane 22). Rejecting the notion that beauty should be her sole accomplishment, Ahalya was determined not to waste her time idly and strived to excel academically. Her twin brother, Divodas, supported her academic pursuits, affirming, "Ma, let her study... She's a brilliant student. And if I have excelled as a warrior, why can she not study what she wants?" (Kane 29).

Indra, a friend and supporter of Divodas in his battle against King Shamber, was warmly welcomed to the palace of Kampilya. However, upon seeing Ahalya, Indra felt a burning desire, yet she resisted his advances. Responding with modern feminist conviction, she questioned the societal validation of women through marriage and rebuffed Indra's objectification of women as mere objects of beauty and desire. Ahalya's sharp inquiries on the societal position of women found solace in Goutam, a sage who respected and formulated laws for the benefit of women. Enamored by his humble wisdom, Ahalya felt a deep connection with his views on women's strength being undermined and underestimated.

Despite her initial resistance, Ahalya eventually married Rishi Gautam, fulfilling a condition symbolized by 'circumambulating the birthing cow,' signifying movement, magnitude, and motivation. This choice aggravated Indra, who vowed to avenge the perceived betrayal with virulent resentment.

Ahalya's married life took an unexpected turn as she became responsible for the ashram and her four children. Goutam, consumed by his desire to become a 'Maharshi,' neglected her, leaving Ahalya yearning for love and care. Frustrated by the transformation of her fervent desire for learning into the role of an uncomplaining mother, Ahalya expressed her discontent, feeling burdensome and humiliated.

Seeking solace, she succumbed to Indra's advances, leading to Goutam's furious curse. Ahalya, realizing her guilt, accepted her desires with contrite penitence. Goutam's curse changed her life drastically - her children were taken away, Goutam deserted her, and her yearning for education remained unfulfilled. Her meeting with Sita in the epilogue revealed her suppressed regret and empathy for Sita's similar plight.



Ahalya questioned societal expectations that confine women to predefined roles and condemned the hypocrisy that subjected women to moral trials. She highlighted the societal bias that stigmatizes women for their perceived falls from virtue. Ahalya's redemption was her own choice, renouncing Goutam with broken trust and hurt pride. She declared her independence and self-realization, stating, "I fought, I struggled, I obeyed, I compromised, I rebelled, I surrendered, but above all, and at last, I think I found myself. I found the truth that is me. I lived the life given to me as a woman with all honesty, true to my instincts and faithful to my impulses, eager and yearning, but always true to myself. Always" (Kane 349). Ahalya's emancipation embodies the spirit of new womanhood, characterized by nonchalant jurisdiction, valiant resoluteness, and lofty wisdom, echoing Simone de Beauvoir's vision of women as subjects in their own right.

### **The Scope and Limitations of the Study**

The vitality of the epic, The Ramayana, resonates through its diverse interpretations, retellings, adaptations, and renditions that have proliferated over the centuries. Remarkably, every regional dialect in India boasts a significant work on The Ramayana. Indian English writers have extensively explored and sometimes deviated from the theme of The Ramayana. Given the widespread influence of The Ramayana on Indian English literature, it becomes challenging to encompass all such works within the scope of this study. Consequently, the researcher has narrowed the focus to the prominent echoes of The Ramayana found in selected works of Indian English writers. Notably, the researcher has delved into the Valmiki Ramayana through its faithful translation by Arshia Sattar.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Kane, Kavita. *Sita's Sister*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2016.
2. - - -. *Lanka's Princess*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2017.
3. - - -. *Ahalya's Awakening*. Chennai: Westland, 2019.
4. - - -. *Menaka's Choice*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2015.
5. Mohanty, Ayuta. Revisiting the New Woman in Indian Mythology, *IJSRST*, Issue 2, Volume 4, 2018.
6. Mondal, Krishna Chatur Sow, and Lavanya S. "Satyavati: The Enigmatic Woman in Kavita Kane's *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*." *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 2019, pp. 295–301. Crossref, doi:10.37200/ijpr/v23i1/pr190238.
7. Sahasrabudhe, Aishwarya. "In Ahalyas Awakening, Kavita Kané Questions the Penalty for Infidelity, and its Significance in Indian Mythology." *Firstpost*, 30 Aug. 2019. Web. 04 May 2021.
8. Thapar, Romila. *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 1978. Print.