# REIMAGINING WOMANHOOD IN MYTHICAL NARRATIVES THROUGH CONTEMPORARY RETELLINGS: AN EDUCATIONAL ENVISIONING AND INTEGRATIVE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

*Hindu mythologies have played a significant role in shaping social norms, roles, and hierarchies in the Indian subcontinent They have influenced gender roles, caste divisions, and social practices the portrayal of women in Indian epics often focuses on a limited range of experiences and perspectives. Feminist revisionist mythmaking aims to disrupt the traditional portrayal of women in myths reinforcing stereotypes, marginalizing female characters, and perpetuating patriarchal power structures. It brings to the forefront the voices of women, empowering and validating their experiences. Through revisionism, female characters are often remained as strong and multidimensional individuals who challenge societal expectations asserting agency, and actively participate in shaping their own destinies. The NEP 2020 recognizes the significance of Indian tradition and culture in shaping the identity of future generations. The contemporary retellings explore issues that resonate with current societal concerns like social justice, environmental sustainability, and gender equality. Incorporating such retellings in academic curricula helps students connect these myths to their own lives, fostering relevant engagement with the traditional and new narratives, thereby fostering gender equity with due importance to binaries and also the third gender. The present paper studies the evolution of the representation of women as self-sustained identities in select contemporary feminist retellings of Hindu epics, through lenses of Gender and other literary theories. Further, it also seeks to explore integrating these fresh narratives educationally as short stories, reading texts, documentaries or animations in the syllabi of the adolescent students to mould and channelise their minds towards value-based learning.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Myths, Revisionism, Womanhood, Gender Equity, NEP.*

## INTRODUCTION

The NEP 2020, or the National Education Policy 2020 in India, emphasises the importance of Indian tradition and culture in shaping the identity of future generations. One aspect of this recognition is the incorporation of contemporary retellings of myths and stories into academic curricula. These retellings explore issues that resonate with current societal concerns, such as social justice, environmental sustainability, and gender equality.By including such retellings in academic curricula, students have the opportunity to connect these myths to their own lives, fostering a relevant engagement with both traditional and new narratives. This approach allows students to explore and understand the relevance of these stories in the context of their own experiences and the world they live in. It encourages critical thinking, empathy, and a deeper understanding of societal issues.

In terms of gender equity, the inclusion of retellings in academic curricula can play a significant role. By exploring myths that address gender-related topics and incorporating narratives that challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes, students can develop a more nuanced understanding of gender equality. The inclusion of retellings that highlight the experiences of binary genders as well as the third gender can help foster a more inclusive and accepting environment. By engaging with the concept of gender performativity, NEP 2020 can foster critical thinking and self-reflection among students. It encourages individuals to question societal norms, reflect on their own gender identities and performances, and consider the ways in which their actions contribute to the construction of gender. This self-reflection can lead to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics and contribute to personal growth and empathy.

Revisionism, Adrienne Rich writes, is an "act of looking back" and "survival."(1972)  Through feminist revisionist mythmaking, female characters are often reimagined as strong, complex, and multidimensional individuals who challenge societal expectations, assert their agency, and actively participate in shaping their own destinies. These narratives encourage readers to question and reflect upon the portrayal of women and gender dynamics in mythology.

Traditional epics and myths often feature archetypal characters that embody gender-specific traits and attributes.They often reinforce binary gender roles, portraying men and women in stereotypical ways. Feminist revisionist mythmaking aims to disrupt the traditional portrayal of women in myths, which often reinforces stereotypes, marginalises female characters, and perpetuates patriarchal power structures. It seeks to bring to the forefront the voices and stories of women, providing a counter-narrative that empowers and validates their experiences.

The present paper studies the evolution of the representation of women as self-sustained identities in select contemporary feminist retellings of Hindu epics, through lenses of Gender and other literary theories. Further, it also seeks to explore integrating these fresh narratives educationally as short stories, reading texts, documentaries or animations in the syllabi of the adolescent students to mould and channelise their minds towards value-based learning.

Women, not being positioned as the subject, have not created their own distinct mythologies or narratives that reflect their own aspirations, dreams, and desires. Instead, women have historically been represented through the lens of men's dreams, limiting their ability to shape their own religious, poetic, and cultural narratives.

Talking about Revisionist Mythmaking, Alicia Ostriker in her influential work writes,

> "whenever a poet employs a figure or a story previously accepted and defined by culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist; that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible." (1986)

Revisionist mythmaking can provide an opportunity to address historical injustices and marginalised perspectives that may have been ignored or misrepresented in traditional narratives. The "myth of woman" is a culturally imposed stereotypes, assumptions and prejudices about femininity on women for the necessary construction of "woman" in a patriarchal society. With the due involvement of revisionist mythmaking, the "myth of woman" will eventually be phased out. (Beauvoir 214) By asserting their agency, through revisionist literature, women can break free from societal expectations and be recognized as full individuals with their own diverse experiences, abilities, and contributions. In order to challenge and broaden the confines of conventional myths and cultural narratives and enable a more inclusive and

diverse representation of women's reality, revisionist mythmaking seeks to reclaim agency for women and provide spaces for their stories.

**Sita's Sister (2014)**

Urmila is often overshadowed by her more famous sister, Sita, and her husband, Lakshman, who is a prominent figure in the story. The Ramayana portrays Urmila as a loving woman who voluntarily chooses to remain in Ayodhya and serve her in-laws while her husband travels with Lord Ram and Sita into exile. For the duration of Lakshman's fourteen-year exile, Urmila is in a deep sleep since he shared his sleep with her to keep her well-rested and in good health. According to legend, Urmila awoke from her protracted slumber when Lakshman returned to Ayodhya following his banishment.

The female revisionist writers "invade the sanctuaries of existing language, and the treasuries where our meanings as "male" and "female" are themselves preserved." It is obvious when women write strongly as women that they are trying to undermine and change the culture and literature they inherit. (Ostriker 1986) In the classic versions of the Ramayana, Urmila is a voiceless figure. She is solely known to the readers via Sita and Lakshman. She was who? She was not heard when it came to her experiences or her interpretation of events. Kané's novel makes an effort to give Urmila a voice and explores her story in greater detail, emphasising both her character growth and her contributions to the plot. Unlike the epic hero, who often starts their journey with a clear and defined goal, the revisionist heroine embarks on her adventure without knowing her destination from the outset. Her quest is not a straightforward linear path but rather a process of self-discovery and exploration. She must navigate her inner world, engaging in various psychic processes such as meditation, memory reflection, prayer, questioning, and associative thinking. (Ostriker 1986)

Kavita Kane's Urmila is intelligent, outspoken, and independent, rejecting the traditional gender roles assigned to women in ancient Indian society. One example of Urmila's strength and independence is evident during Sita's swayamvar. In Kane's narrative, when Ravan attempts to force her into matrimony with him, Urmila doesn't succumb to fear or submission. Kané writes, "Urmila felt his lascivious gaze on her. His eyes glitters wolfishly in his cruel, dark face. His open blatant look made Urmila Cringe, but she lifted up her chin fiercely. She looked squarely up at him, her eyes sparkling with unsuppressed fury and loathing." (Kané 2014) Her act of staring back with "hatred and anger" sends a clear message that she will not be intimidated or silenced by Ravan's advances. This action signifies her agency and willingness to stand up for herself, even in the face of a powerful and potentially threatening figure like Ravan.

Urmila's pursuit of knowledge can be seen as a performance of a non-traditional gender role. In her society, women were not expected to be highly educated, but Urmila defies this norm by devoting herself to learning and reading. Kané writes, "Marriage did not hold much interest for Urmila but it was a social discipline she would have to conform to. She would rather seek knowledge instead of a suitor." (Kané 2014)

Kané's portrayal of Urmila challenges the idea that women should be confined to domestic spaces and should prioritise their roles as wives and mothers. She is a painter, a scholar who has been to all the conferences and religious seminars held across the country and a shrewd administrator.

Kané critiques patriarchal systems and the impact they have on women's lives. For example, the treatment of Sita, Urmila, Mandavi and other women by the men in their lives is scrutinised and questioned, exposing the flaws in the patriarchal systems that govern ancient Indian society. Urmila reveals the challenges women face in navigating a society

that does not prioritise their autonomy and agency. When Bharat declares his decision to leave for Nandigram and do penance and live as a hermit for the next fourteen years, Urmila unleashes her wrath verbally against the patriarchal system. She could not let Mandavi face the same fate as hers. She "felt a fury she had never experienced before." She felt her eyes burning with the flames of fury. She says,

> "So be it, Bharat, like your brothers, Ram and Lakshman, you too shall live a life of an ascetic, free from the bond of love and worldly care. Who cares whatever happens to your wife and your family? Today, in this room, we have talked about all sorts of dharma - of the father and the sons, of the king and the princes, of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya, even of the wife for her husband. But is there no dharma of the husband for his wife? No dharma of the son for his mother? Is it always about the father, sons and brothers?" (Kané 2014)

She becomes vocal about the grief of not just her but all the other women who have been bearing the collateral damage of the actions undertaken by their husbands, sons and brothers. She flares,

> " I ask again and again- does the man have no duties towards his wife and his mother? Why are the queens made to suffer the grief of parting from their sons? Can anyone bring any sanity and sense into Mother Kausalya's crazed anguish? Does anyone see or recognize the silent tears of Mother Sumitra? Or does one only see the wickedness of Mother Kaikeyi and not her repentance, her private tears? Like the other two mothers she too shall be suffering the same, endless pain - is that what your penance means, Bharat? Not forgive your mother? But why are you punishing your wife? What is her sin? That she is your wife and has to follow the dharma likewise of disobeying her husband's decision irrespective of what it entails?" (Kané 2014)

In the novel, Urmila can be seen as a character who challenges traditional gender roles and expectations through her actions and behaviours. She refuses to conform to the norms and expectations of her society and instead carves out her own path, thereby subverting the gender roles assigned to her. She becomes the voice of truth and justice.

## EXPLORING SISTERHOOD AND SOLIDARITY THROUGH URMILA

bell hooks, in her ground-breaking work *Feminist Theory: From Margin to the Center* (1984), writes, "We are taught that women are "natural" enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another." (1984)

Sisterhood is all about solidarity among women. And "solidarity requires sustained, ongoing commitment." (hooks 1984) This aspect is clearly revealed by Kané in her text. Here, the concept of sisterhood is explored through the relationship between Urmila and her three sisters. The novel portrays this bond as one of deep love, loyalty, and mutual support, despite the challenges and hardships they face.

Urmila's character is used to highlight the often-overlooked role of sisters in Indian mythology and society. The novel gives Urmila a voice and explores the complexity of her relationship with her sisters. She is portrayed as the confidant, supporter, and protector of her sisters, especially Sita. When Lakshman kills the demon disguised as Sita, she forgets that it is the man she loves and tries to stab him with a dagger to avenge her sister's death. She believed that first, she was a sister and later a wife. Kané's portrayal of sisterhood deconstructs the "male supremacist ideology that

encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men." (hooks 1984)

Hooks writes, "We are taught that women are "natural" enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another." (1984) This notion reflects in Queen Sunaina's words when she shares her worry about the four sisters going to the same household as sisters-in-law. However, Urmila convinces her mother with her assuring words. She says, "What could be better than us sisters getting married into the same family? How could our staying together harm us? Will marriage lessen our love for each other? It shall strengthen it further, as no one knows us better. We love each other too much for anything or anyone to come between us." (Kané 2014)

Malviya & Raviya, in their research paper, asserts, "What is praiseworthy about sisterhood rendered by the author in the novel is that it is not simply idealisation of the theme…As she shows the strong bond between the sisters, she does not glorify it. The peaks and troughs that are part of every human relationship are found between them too." (2021) When Manthara succeeds in spreading poison against each other in the minds of the sister, a petty fight takes place between the sister, which with the appropriate intervention and wisdom of Urmila, gets resolved. She tells her sisters, "What are we fighting about - who'll be queen, who is superior, who ups who? How does it matter? Did we ever think this way? We were always sisters, never cousins, never queens and princesses. Oh, what's wrong with us?" (Kané 2014) Here, Manthara becomes the patriarchal force that tries to disrupt the solidarity between the sisters for personal gain.

Thus, the sisters deconstruct the patriarchal tool of "women hating one another." hooks states, "Women need to have the experience of working through hostility to arrive at understanding and solidarity if only to free ourselves from the sexist socialisation that tells us to avoid confrontation because we will be victimised or destroyed." (1984)

## THE FISHER QUEEN'S DYNASTY (2019)

*The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* by Kavita Kané offers a fresh perspective on the *Mahabharata* by delving into the life and role of Satyavati, a character often overlooked in the epic. In this retelling, Kane explores the story of Satyavati, a fisher girl who defies societal expectations and rises to become the queen of Hastinapur, ultimately shaping the destiny of the kingdom.

The character of Satyavati can be analysed as a woman who transcends traditional gender roles and moves beyond the confines of the domestic sphere. She was "well educated and refined" unlike the other girls of her age during that era. She was a ferry woman whom Rishi Parashar considered as "one of the most trusted and brave people who ferry boats, come storm or rain."(Kané 2019) She actively made choices, took actions, and asserted her agency. When Parashar made advances towards her, she stopped him and voiced out her genuine concerns blended with the art of seduction.

> "'You won't marry me, since you are a wandering mendicant,' she persisted.' So how do I go back to the world I come from? And what if I have a child from you?' she questioned shrewdly, thinking again of Menaka and Shakuntala. 'Who will marry me?'" (Kané 2019)

She was reluctant to submit herself to the powerful Rishi without a price. In return for her sexual submission to Rishi Parashar, she made him gift her with a body fragrance, eternal youth and beauty. He also assured her that she can marry "whomsoever you want! You will remain a virgin. Or rather, the man you will make love to next will not realize that you are not a virgin!" (Kané 2019)

She became a different woman after her experience with Rishi Parashar. She became "aware of her sexuality and her power over men." (Kané 2019) She was free. "She had power and control over her life and love." (Kané 2019)

The character of Satyavati encourages readers to question traditional gender norms and to recognize the potential for women to shape their own destinies. Kane portrays Satyavati as an ambitious woman, which was not a "natural" trait of femininity. Kane's Satyavati does not shy away from voicing out her wishes and choices. She feels free to give away her child to his father without guilt for she did not want to be a rishi's wife and live in an ashram. She says, "I was born a princess and I shall be queen someday." (Kané 2019) She promises herself, "I - not fate or God - shall be responsible for my own happiness, my own future. I promise myself, I will not be the victim anymore." (Kané 2019)

As she swore, she navigated her life and became the Queen and later the Great Matriarch of the Kuru Dynasty. However, she had to use her sexuality as a weapon or more precisely a bait to attract men. She aspired to be a Queen because she wanted an upliftment. Beauvoir writes,

> "it is an almost irresistible temptation for a young woman to be part of a privileged caste when she can do so simply by surrendering her body; she is doomed to have love affairs because her wages are minimal for the very high standard of living society demands of her; if she settles for what she earns, she will be no more than a pariah" (1997)

## A FEMALE ASPIRATION FOR POWER

Satyavati's journey from a fisher girl to the queen of Hastinapur represents a powerful transformation that defies patriarchal stereotypes and expectations. As the queen, she is exposed to new possibilities of personal growth and empowerment, and her voice becomes one of resistance against the oppressive norms of her time. Coming from a marginalised social class she was often at the receiving ends of barbs thrown on her by the privileged and upper-class members of the society. She was labelled as 'Queen Daseyi' - which meant "one of the dasa – slave, or at the most polite, an aboriginal woman" by Kripi who self-proclaimed as a scholar herself. (Kané 2019) She was mocked and even condemned by the subjects of Hastinapur. Nevertheless, with her cleverness and planning, conquers the minds of the people. She becomes 'their' Queen Daseyi and later Queen Satyavati. Her charm and "ruthless efficiency" brought miracle in the palace and the kingdom. "She tolerated no slackness, nor lazy service… She left the running of the palace to highly trusted experts, but she supervised them all, correcting and making suggestions." (Kané 2019)Becoming the Queen, she never let herself slip into the slumber of luxuries, rather, she attended to her subjects' needs. She initiated the upliftment of the marginalised communities and empowered poor migrant communities and "riled many from the communities at the court and in the city". (Kané 2019) Her actions demonstrate that women are equally capable of handling responsibilities and governance.

Kane writes Satyavati as a competent administrator who at times even Bhishm looked up to. Teaming up with Bhishm, she proves herself to be an efficient and effective manager of the courtly affairs of the kingdom of Hastinapur.

Gendered stereotypes surrounding women's leadership have been pervasive in societies around the world. These stereotypes are often based on the belief that women are inherently different from men and, as a result, are considered subordinate or lacking in certain qualities necessary for leadership. This notion is reinforced by the gendered symbolic order that shapes language, ideologies, and societal assumptions about leadership. Kane's Satyavati challenges this notion by exhibiting outstanding leadership skills. Instead of being a warrior-hero, she exercises her leadership through strategic

thinking, diplomacy, and administrative acumen. Her approach challenges the notion that leadership is solely about physical strength and military conquests.

She emerges as a post-heroic leader. Post-heroic leadership acknowledges the importance of shared leadership, distributed decision-making, and collaboration among multiple individuals within a team or organization.(Crevani et al., 2017) Satyavati's leadership style is more inclusive and collaborative, as demonstrated through her partnership with Bhisma in handling courtly affairs. She seeks to build bridges and incorporate diverse perspectives, disrupting the hierarchical and authoritarian nature of traditional heroic leadership.

Satyavati's leadership does not require her to suppress her femininity or adopt traditionally masculine traits. Instead, she draws strength from her unique identity as a woman and refuses to conform to gendered expectations of leadership. Her ability to lead authentically challenges the notion that leadership is inherently tied to masculine characteristics.

Later in life, when fate hit her with King Shantanu's demise, she refused to submit herself to the dull life of a widow and she became more involved in the political affairs of her kingdom. During the mourning phase after her son's death, she proves that "a queen needs to be more sensible than just sensitive." (Kané 2019) One of the ways she displays her political acumen is by forging alliances with neighbouring kingdoms through treaties with powerful rulers. This diplomatic approach not only strengthens Hastinapur's position but also reflects Satyavati's understanding of the importance of maintaining external relationships for the kingdom's stability and security. Her vision extends beyond the immediate concerns of the kingdom and encompasses long-term strategies for growth and prosperity. Satyavati's adeptness in handling courtly affairs and governing the kingdom challenges the notion that women are less capable than their male counterparts in matters of politics and leadership.

Satyavati can be seen as a relatable figure for women in the twenty-first century. Like modern women, she asserts her independence, pursues her ambitions, and defies the limitations placed upon her. Her story reflects the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Her portrayal serves as a reminder that women have agency, potential, and the ability to challenge societal expectations. By showcasing Satyavati's journey, The Fisher Queen's Dynasty (2019) offers a narrative that resonates with contemporary audiences, highlighting the timeless scenarios of women's empowerment, self-determination, and the capacity to transcend societal limitations.

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, incorporating contemporary retellings of myths in academic curricula aligns with the NEP 2020's goal of fostering a holistic and well-rounded education. By connecting these narratives to current societal concerns, students can develop a deeper appreciation for their cultural heritage while also gaining insights into pressing issues of social justice, environmental sustainability, and gender equality.

Societies are not static entities, and progress has been made over time in many parts of the world to address gender inequalities and promote women's rights. However, it is also clear that there is still work to be done to achieve full gender equality and dismantle systems of oppression that affect women and other marginalised genders. It is in this direction these revisionist works should move pushing themes like gender, intersectionality, climate etc. to the front, so that

they receive due reception and understanding.

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