



# Satyavati as a New Woman in Kavita Kané's *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*

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**Abstract**— *The moment we pronounce the names of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the great epics of India, the great female characters like Kunti, Draupadi, Gandhari, Sita, Kaushalya, Sumitra, and Kaikeyi come to mind. It is said that many other female characters are no less important than they are, but they have not been given due place in retellings. Some contemporary Indian writers have begun giving voice to them in their retellings of The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. Kavita Kané is one of them, a fiction writer who gives lesser-known female characters a modern look in her retellings. Her keen interest lies in exposing these marginalised women characters, who have been largely unsung in Indian texts and creative writings. The present paper is based on Kavita Kané's The Fisher Queen's Dynasty, focusing on the character of Satyavati, the second wife of King Shantanu, the grand matriarch of the Kuru dynasty, and the first queen to rule Hastinapur, whose ambition is believed to have sparked the great war of Kurukshetra. Kané examines the black-and-white image of Satyavati in the Mahabharata and presents her as a grey character, referred to as the Fisher Queen. She hatches a graph of her journey from an abandoned fisher-girl child to the great matriarch of Hastinapur. She re-creates her personality as an assertive, sensible, courageous, and clearheaded woman who uses men's power to find her individuality in a male-oriented world and presents herself as an equal to men. The present paper deals with Satyavati, whose sharp wit and farsightedness subsequently shape the course of events and her destiny. It deconstructs the conventional image of Satyavati as a woman. It highlights her as a diplomatic, unapologetic, and bold woman, encompassing various roles such as daughter, wife, mother, and Queen.*



**Keywords**— *Mythology, Transformation, Swayamvara, Niyoga, Attitudinal shift, Contemporary Woman.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Satyavati is the leading protagonist of Kané's novel, and the entire narration revolves around the two key figures Satyavati and Bhishma; hence, the author places her alongside the other characters like King Uparichar Vasu, Sage Parasar, King Shantanu, Chitrangada, Vichitravirya, Amba, Ambika, Ambalika, and Sage Veda Vyas to project her personality from different angles. In popular narratives, Satyavati is portrayed as a selfish woman who usurps the throne of Hastinapur and the rights of Devarath, but Kané meticulously examines her place in history, deconstructs the traditional image, and humanises

her character with shades of grey. She is not a scheming woman from the beginning, rather an abandoned princess from her birthright; brought up as a mere fisher-girl who later changed the history of the Kuru Dynasty by marrying King Shantanu, with the stipulation that her son shall be the heir to the throne of Hastinapur. Though Bhishma is the rightful heir to the throne of Hastinapur, he renounces his claim to the throne. He takes a lifelong path of celibacy to fulfill his father's unusual wish to marry Satyavati. Moreover, she is the first woman to rule Hastinapur, make her own choices, and challenge the conventional patriarchal mindset.

## II. DISCUSSION

In the Mahabharat, Satyavati is the second wife of King Shantanu and the stepmother of Bhishma, known by several names, including Kali, Matsyagandha, Gandhavati, Yojnagandha, and Daseyi, who later becomes the queen mother of the Kurus. Her life begins just like that of a fairy tale. The story of her birth in The Mahabharat goes like this:

Adrika swallowed the semen of the king, and after some time was caught by the fishermen... From the stomach of that fish came out a male and a female child of human form. The fisher wondered much, and, wending unto King Uparichara (for they were his subjects), told him all. They said, 'O king, these two beings of human shape have been found in the body of a fish!'... After the birth of the twins, the *Apsara* herself became freed from her curse... She left her fish form and assumed her own celestial shape.

(Ganguli, 2020. Book I, Adi Parva Section LXIII).

Moreover, it is also clearly mentioned that her father had abandoned her at birth because he wished a boy to look after his monarch, so he relentlessly gave her to the fisherman. Vyas ji holds that:

The male child amongst the two was taken by Uparichara. That child afterwards became the virtuous and truthful monarch Matsya...The fish-smelling daughter of the Apsara in her piscatorial form was then given by the king unto the fisherman, saying, 'Let this one be thy daughter.' That girl was known by the name of Satyavati. And gifted with great beauty and possessed of every virtue.

(Ganguli, 2020. Book I, Adi Parva Section LXIII).

Beyond the archetypal narration, Kavita Kané's novel is a modern interpretation of Vyasa's Mahabharata, giving her characters a contemporary look that makes them more relatable in the present scenario. Here, Satyavati is born through a woman (not a fish) named Adrika and King Uparichar Vasu, 'the mother gave birth to twins, sire,' her maternal uncle, Dasharaj, informs the king. 'Yes, I know,' replied King Uparichar Vasu shortly. 'I shall keep the boy with me. You can have the girl... She is your niece, after

all... He is abandoning the girl (Kané 4). And the journey of abandonment started from here. She was born as a princess and grew up as a mere fisher-girl with her maternal uncle, Dasharaj, a fisherman. Her mother died giving birth to her, and her father deserted her only because she is a girl. Despite being a princess, she never receives the royal identity her brother does, but instead faces discrimination and aversion in society. Due to her dark complexion and being the daughter of a chieftain, "Everyone is called her that – Kali – an unimaginative reference to her dark skin, dark hair, and dark eyes", and treated as a pariah. Though she is young and well-educated, people still treat her as an untouchable. Being part of the fishing community, she is destined to "sell fish and ferry people" (Kané 31), and because of this, her body smells like a rotten fish. That is why she is also known as *Matsyagandha*, which means one who has a fishy smell. The reason is also clear in The Mahabharat that "owing to contact with fishermen, was for some time of the fishy smell" (Ganguli, Section LXIII). Here, Kané reveals the sour reality of gender discrimination prevalent in society, where men have given privileges by their natural birthright, and women are deprived of that.

Kané brilliantly articulates Satyavati's character and re-examines the course of events in The Mahabharat. Though the outline of the story is the same, the author reveals a crucial fact from her life that leads her on a journey from a fisherwoman to the Queen of Hastinapur. Shifad observes, "It is a fresh perspective on the things that led to the fall of the Kuru Dynasty. Magic and reality are masterfully interwoven and liberties taken by the author are minimal when it comes to the plot setting" (Rev. August 30, 2021 <https://www.goodreads.com>).

In one of her interviews with *The Times of India*, Kané discloses the delineation of Satyavati in her book:

She is my favourite character in the Mahabharat, I confess! I see her largely as the most political person in the epic, the seeds of which are sown in the later narrative as the story unfolds... We see her as a widowed queen mother who ruled her own future, her family, and the kingdom, in addition to that of Bhishma. She unmade and made him. She turned him from Devavrat to Bhishma, while transforming herself astutely from Matsyagandha to Satyavati, and in doing so, changed the lives of all those in the epic. Yet we don't often fathom her significance. She

was the Queen in every sense (Chakrabarty, 2018).

The novel re-interprets things through a woman's point of view, and the major characters are presented through a female lens. From the beginning, she struggles for her existence in the androcentric society where everyone teases and persecutes her because of her dark skin. She reacts assertively and feels proud of her dark complexion, saying, "I am Kali; I don't mind my dark skin, I don't want to turn fair-skinned" (Kané 8). She protests for her rights, makes her choices and verdicts, and crosses the boundaries that have framed her to a limited world.

Satyavati is not like a typical Indian woman sitting beside the temple, waiting for her fortune to change; rather, she is a contemporary woman who makes her own decisions and shapes her destiny through her actions. She says sturdily that "I – not Fate or God – shall be responsible for my own happiness, my own future" (Kané 31). Being an ambitious woman, Satyavati does not want to marry Rishi Parasar to live as a Sadhvi. She coupled with Rishi because she knew he was the only one who could convert her smell into fragrance. He is the well-known rishi, and through his magical power and his words, he can curse and bless someone; so, she asks thoughtfully, "I smell of fish. Can you remove it? ...People flee from my stink... who wants to make love to a foul-smelling fisher girl?" (Kané 17) Rishi Parasar promises her and perfumes her body. He says, "You will no longer be the stinking fisher girl, *Matsyagandha* will now be *Yojnagandha*; your new, musky fragrance will waft for miles together and shall entice anyone whom you want" (Kané 18). She cleverly encounters the Brahmin by igniting his sexual desire, uses her sexual power to control him smoothly, and is granted everlasting virginity as a blessing. "Satyavati, gratified with having obtained the excellent boon in consequence of which she became sweet-scented and her virginity remained unsullied, conceived through Parasara's embraces" (Ganguli, 127).

Satyavati is a practical woman, introduces herself to King Shantanu by showing herself as a hardworking woman, "We work with our hands: they are our sole fortune... I rely on these hands for my present, my future... Unlike the fortunate rich who hold their wealth in their hands" (Kané 55). It was quite strange for him because, for the very first time, he met a woman who was as hard as his dagger. Though she was highly intoxicating, her pragmatic philosophy impressed him deeply. Her perspectives on life are very clear, and they show in her words as she considers it as a whole.

She is aware of the artificial structure of the hegemonic society where a woman has been designed to be dictated,

ruled, and considered as a trophy for men. She knows that men use women only for their pleasure and then throw them out of their lives, so when King Shantanu proposes to her to be his lady, she asks him savagely how he will keep her, "As his concubine or a consort?" She does not want to repeat the history in which her mother was used as a pawn in her father, King Uparichar's, game, who never accepted her mother as his wife; therefore, she wants to make it clear before accepting his proposal. Though she knows he loves her and that she will be the younger Queen, she does not let her feelings sway her; she is apprehensive about her future. For her, "Marriage is not a love story, it is a treaty, a political pact, a pledge" (Kané 74). She reminisces about her father's words, "Don't be sentimental; politics also rules emotions, not just kings and crowns and kingdoms" (Kané 74-75).

She knows that Devavrata is the rightful heir to Hastinapur and to make sure that her progeny will be the successor after her marriage to King Shantanu, she makes him (Devavrata) compel to take the terrible decision, "I shall never marry, and, henceforth, shall dedicate my life to celibacy and unbroken chastity. I swear that I shall remain without a wife and child till my last breath" (Kané 91). It might be an awful act in most of the versions, and for that, she is stigmatized as a wicked woman. Still, being a woman, she wants to secure the future for her descendants in Hastinapur and to do so, she initially takes advantage of Rishi's power to make her perfumed, then uses King Shantanu's sexual urges to clear her way toward the throne and finally takes advantage of Devavrat's loyalty in every possible way that secures her status and the throne for her progeny. She intelligently manipulates malepower to safeguard her position as Queen, challenges patriarchal norms, and emerges as an empowered woman. "She is neither weak nor vulnerable" (Kané 39). Kané says, "She had just wrested the throne from him and grabbed it for herself and her future children." (Kané 89).

Satyavati is a strong-willed woman who grew up in a poor maiden family. Still, because of her determination and marvellous nature, she earns the title of *Queen*, and for this, she does not care about the socially sanctioned ideology. After holding the position of a Queen, she also becomes the representative of the fisher community and raises her voice for their rights. She thinks that "The fisher folk have as much as much of right to live with dignity, as the other citizens of the state" (Kané 142). It's a paradox in society that if someone gets a higher status among them, they cannot digest and oppose him in every possible way; a similar kind of situation Satyavati is facing, where people violently oppose her, saying, "You are not a queen by birth or by worth" (145). Though she

gains the power and position of the Queen, she remains conscious of fisher beings, their struggles, and their welfare. Mahato, Bhushan, and Kapoor also acknowledge her voice for the underprivileged people who always thought of the betterment and the upliftment of the fisher community because they are the weaker section of the society, and they are marginalised people" (RWND, 252).

Let us see the different sides of Satyavati as a mother as well as an ill-ruled queen of Hastinapur. Satyavati is very clear in her thinking and plans. She is the mother of two princes, Chitrangad and Vichitravirya (Virya). Satyavati knew that Chitrangad was more capable than his brother Virya, but his premature death crumbled down her ambitions. As a mother, she laments her son's death, but as a queen, she decides to train Virya to the throne. She is a clearheaded woman, astutely selected Kashi princess for her son Vichitravirya, discusses his marriage with Bhishma, and tells him, "I don't want just a pretty face. She should have enough political clout to consolidate the Kurus as the most influential empire" (204). According to her, only Kasi princesses are eligible to be the Queen of Hastinapur. However, the King of Kashi does not want to do this, so he does not invite Hastinapur to participate in the *swayamvara*. She, as a queen, retaliates against Kashi and responds angrily, "Kasi will have to pay dearly for this insult", so she forces Bhishma to abduct Kashi's Princesses.

She is unique in her approach towards progeny and therefore takes a paradigm from Rishi Parashuram, who annihilated the twenty-one generations of royal warriors and Kshatriyas, leaving the kingdom heirless; only widows then created a new generation. She says, "I think the royal women defeated Parashuram's purpose beautifully. By going to rishis and Brahmins, they were still the creators of their progeny, a new race". She advocates her thoughts and accepts the custom of *Niyog* for the queens:

Through *Niyog*, I am giving the same powers to my daughters-in-law. It is not the men who are important..., it is the women who give birth and create a new life, a new hope, by perpetuating their family line, their dynasty, their clan, their race. Through men claim it to be theirs, in the name of Patriarchy (Kané 284).

*Niyog* is an ancient Hindu practice that permits a woman to beget a child from another man, whether her husband is incompetent or has died without producing an offspring, but there are certain rules about whom and how she can produce her child. Moreover, the progeny would belong

to the man with whom a woman got married, no matter whose seed it is. There are numerous historical examples of women practising *Niyog*. As Devdutt Pattanaik describes the same concept of *Niyog* in his *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata*, he says, "It does not matter who sowed the seed in the field; what matters more is who the master of the field is... Fatherhood is defined by marriage" (Kané 12). Here, he narrates the story of Tara, the wife of Guru Brihaspati, who begets a child from Chandra; yet, Brihaspati is considered the father of her son, not Chandra. For instance, in *The Mahabharat*, Dhritarashtra and Pandu are born through the practice of *Niyog* because Vichitravirya died childless; yet they belong to his father and the Kuru race. Besides, Kunti's sons also procreate through *Niyog* because Pandu is unable to beget a child, so he allows his wife to practice *Niyog*. Satyavati knows that one of her sons has died and another is impotent, so she convinces her two daughters-in-law, Ambika and Ambalika, to practice *Niyog* with Rishi Ved Vyas. Initially, they are not ready for it and argue with her, but Satyavati cleverly manipulates the queens' minds, making them realise how they will shape their destinies as queen mothers. She says, "By going to Vyas, and not Virya, you are still the mother of your child...Would you not like to have a child, a child to love?" (Kané 301). Through Satyavati, Kané conveys to the world that women play a crucial role in procreation: "It is not the man who is important...It is the woman who has the power to create a new life" (Kané 301). Aditi Dhirghangi also accepts the same concept of progeny and says, "This perception of Satyavati counters the patriarchal view of men responsible for the creation of a progeny. She broke this stereotype and postulated that women are important because they are the real creators of offspring" (Kané 131).

Kané weaves a complex web of her identity. There are lots of contradictions in her personality; on one side, she becomes the voice of subalterns, a suppressive community, assertively reacts against wrongdoing, and raises her voice for her rights, and on the other side, she becomes a ruthless, mad-ambitious, cold-hearted woman; she subjugates others through her power and self-centred nature. For example, she feels remorseful towards Bhishma for usurping his right to be king; simultaneously, she feels victorious for saving the throne for her descendants. Besides, there are two sides to her decision towards progeny; one, she sends her daughters-in-law to a stranger so that they can feel motherhood; feel victorious rather than a victim, as she says, "See it as a power, a choice, to have a child" and the second, she forced them to be with a stranger, just because of her strong ambition to procreate an heir to the throne as it was

empty since the death of Virya. Moreover, despite knowing that Virya is not eligible for the throne, she argues with Bhishma to crown him, "My son is ill, not diseased!... And even if he were, no one, even you, Dev, would have stopped me from crowning Virya as a king" (Kané 212) while, she is more conscious of crowning the eligible successor to the throne; therefore, ready to make Vidur a crown prince of Hastinapur. Apart from this, she considers a woman a creator and the child belongs to her, but when it comes to Vidur, she considers him the son of Vyas rather than the son of her maid (Parishrami): "Vidur is like them: the son of Vyas."

She is practical in her approach, always believing in her actions and decisions, which help her control her life and shape her destiny. She intellectually frames her life; for example, Rishi Parashar used her to fulfil his amorous desires, but Satyavati turned this event into an opportunity to make her fragrant. Besides, she marries a man who is twice her age and becomes the Queen of a great dynasty. Along with these, she secured the throne of Hastinapur for her offspring and ruled there vivaciously. She intellectually accomplished all castes and classes and established harmonious relationships among the people. Moreover, her decision not to remarry ruined the plan of other princes who had a calculating eye on Hastinapur. She knew "if she remarries, it will be dangerous and she will not gain a husband but lose Hastinapur to some king" (Kané 187).

Satyavati's journey is not easy; she faces many hardships that make her a tenacious, rigorous, and fierce woman. As Bhishma acknowledges her strength and says, "Do you know what's inevitable about you – you take the bad with as much grace as the good and move on. You will never give up; your never-say-die spirit will not allow you to surrender" (Kané 315). It would be apt to mention the comment of Lopamudra Adhikary about Satyavati's character: "Kané's Satyavati is a self-confident, undaunted woman who never succumbs to the convention of the patriarchal society and takes her stance in the face of any untoward situation. She perfectly fits in this image of a modern woman" (Creative Flight, 2021).

### III. CONCLUSION

Kavita Kané re-evaluates Satyavati's character and gives it a contemporary feminist twist. She is an empowered, vivacious, and self-centred woman who knows the political acrobatics. Although she belongs to the lower community, her lower status does not hinder her ambitions; rather, it makes her more assertive in responding as an outspoken woman. Here, Satyavati's character is distinct in that it attempts to change the

stereotypical image and procreate alternative values. She subverts male voices and offers a fine line for the reader to reimagine female voices and their experiences. There are some unsung and sideline facts of her life that Kané delineates through her perspective. Kané also illuminates the most important characteristics of her personality, i.e., her clear-headedness and farsightedness, with which she wins over King Shantanu by marrying him. Second, as a Queen, she becomes adamant and firm in her decisions to save the throne of Hastinapur. And the third, as the grand matriarch of the Kuru family, who finally realises all her blunders and enters the Ganga for salvation, which makes her perfectly grey. There are, no doubt, some contradictions and perplexities, but it is also true that it brings about an attitudinal shift in her behaviour and makes her a new woman of the contemporary world.

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