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Reclaiming the Silenced: A Comparative Study of Urmila, Ahalya, and Surpanakha in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* and Kavita Kane's Feminist Retellings

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Abstract

Feminist Revisionist Mythology is one of the powerful literary movements that highlights the narratives of marginalized female narrative. It also questions the conventional portrayal of women in the mythology. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane are two well-known Indian writers who have made important contributions to this genre with their re-interpretation of female characters from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* retells *Ramya* from Sita's perspective while subtly highlighting other oppressed women from Sita's perspective. However, Kane dedicates distinct novels to marginalized women, concentrating on their unique experiences of marginalization, resistance, and metamorphosis: *Ahalya's Awakening* (2021) for Ahalya, *Sita's Sister* (2014) for Urmila, and *Lanka's Princess* (2016) for Surpanakha. This paper explores how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane employ feminist revisionist mythology to reclaim the voices of marginalized women like Ahalya, Urmila, and Surpanakha, challenging patriarchal narratives through emotional realism and confrontational resistance.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Feminism, Revisionism, Marginalized, Struggle

INTRODUCTION

Indian mythology, particularly through epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, has served as a cultural cornerstone, shaping collective moral, spiritual, and social

frameworks. Nevertheless, these foundational texts often focus on male heroism and virtue, relegating women to roles as idealized partners, passive victims, or vengeful disruptors. While these portrayals have historically reinforced

patriarchal systems, the modern literary landscape has witnessed a strong counter movement in feminist revisionist mythology. This genre aims to reinterpret traditional narratives by highlighting female perspectives and challenging the ideologies that have historically silenced them.

Two modern Indian writers, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane lead this literary change by exploring mythological stories from a clearly feminist perspective yet their storytelling approaches vary meaningfully. In *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), author provides a layered and emotionally intricate depiction of a woman frequently idealized for her compliance. It concurrently offers insights into the stories of other neglected women as Urmila, Ahalya, and Surpanakha, each representing distinct aspects of female strength, suffering, and desire. Divakaruni utilizes a nuanced, emotionally reflective feminism, frequently interwoven with motifs of compassion, resilience, and ethical clarity. Kane, in contrast, employs a more straightforward, confrontational feminist discourse, prompting her characters to challenge patriarchal standards and societal duplicity. Their creations embody two essential elements of feminist storytelling, one based on self-examination and spiritual resilience, the other on defiance and confident redefinition.

Urmila: From Silent Sufferer to Conscious Individual

Urmila, Lakshman's wife who is a marginal character in conventional retellings of the Ramayana, dwarfed by her husband's heroic deeds and the significance of Sita's plight. She is often depicted as the silent, obedient wife who gives up her joy and companionship for the sake of dharma. Her interiority is mostly unexplored, and this restricted representation frequently portrays her as a figure of stoic endurance. *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni recognizes Urmila's suffering, but Sita's viewpoint continues to dominate her

narrative presence. Urmila's sacrifice is portrayed with compassion and respect, emphasizing the psychological cost of her husband's 14-year exile. Divakaruni writes, "Urmila... who bore her loneliness with such grace. Her silence was louder than words" (Divakaruni 207). Urmila's tenacity is captured by this sentence, which highlights the virtue of silent suffering. However, Urmila's voice is mostly unexpressed, which is consistent with Divakaruni's overall narrative emphasis on Sita's consciousness. In interviews, Divakaruni has acknowledged the challenges of incorporating multiple voices within a single narrative. She explains, "I wanted to honor Urmila's sacrifice but also felt constrained by the story being told through Sita's eyes" (Divakaruni, interview with *The Hindu* 2019). Urmila is portrayed in this manner as a sign of emotional fortitude, but her conventional position as a 'silent sufferer' is maintained because her personal conflicts and wants are not thoroughly examined.

In contrast, Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* focuses on Urmila's story, turning her from a supporting character into a complete protagonist. By questioning the cultural norms that valorize silent sacrifice while ignoring women's emotional and intellectual requirements, Kane breaks the normative silence that has been forced upon Urmila. Urmila expresses her inner struggle forcefully. "Why must my sacrifice be less because it was silent?" (*Sita's Sister* 145). This rhetorical question directly challenges social norms that value women's pain as a virtue instead of seeing it as a hardship that needs justice and acknowledgement. Contemporary feminist theories regarding agency and visibility serve as the foundation for Kane's feminist reinterpretation. Judith Butler and other academics contend that the act of 'speaking out' is a radical assertion of agency in situations where women have historically been silenced (Butler, 1997). This reclamation is reflected in Kane's Urmila, who goes from merely tolerating

things to actively defining herself. By delving into Urmila's intellectual life, her sense of abandonment, and her complicated relationship with Sita and Lakshman, the book humanizes a character who is often overlooked. In a panel discussion at the Jaipur Literature Festival (2020), Kane emphasized her intent to "give voice to the women who live in the shadows of myths, whose sacrifices have never been questioned or fully understood." This approach situates Urmila's story within a broader feminist literary project of rewriting history from marginalized perspectives

In addition, feminist commentators like Madhu Kishwar have argued that "the classical Ramayana regularly suppresses women's emotions and intellect in an effort to maintain patriarchal dominance". Kane's depiction of Urmila is consistent with this critique since it highlights her subjectivity and opposition to being erased by the patriarchy. Collectively, these portrayals illustrate two feminist strategies: Divakaruni's kind reverence, which maintains Urmila's silent misery as a sort of spiritual resilience, and Kane's forceful re-voicing, which challenges the invisibility of Urmila's sacrifices and advocates for her identification as a conscious, independent individual. By comparing these two versions, we can see how contemporary authors are altering traditional archetypes to reflect modern views of gender and agency, which adds to the ongoing feminist debate on reclaiming women's voices in mythology

Ahalya: The Cursed Woman and the Question of Consent

Ahalya's episode from Ramayana is one of the combative stories which showcases sexuality, power, punishment and consequences of marginalized women. The traditional myth depicts Ahalya as cursed women for her infidelity with Indra Sakra. Regardless of context or agreement, Ahalya's story has frequently been depicted in moralistic and patriarchal terms that hold her accountable

for wrongdoing. By associating female desire to moral fault, this simplistic depiction perpetuates rigid gender expectations and supports women's subjugation.

With compassion and understated subversion, *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni revisits the story of Ahalya. Divakaruni portrays Ahalya as a victim of deception and unjust social censure rather than a voluntary participant in adultery, even if her narrative space is restricted. According to the novel, Ahalya's attitude following the removal of her curse is as follows: "She looked at me with a serenity that came from surviving shame and judgment" (Divakaruni 88). By portraying Ahalya's fortitude, this image reframes her story as one of survival rather than wrongdoing, thereby fostering sympathy for her.

Divakaruni in an interview "humanize the women of mythology who have been vilified and misunderstood," (*Scroll.in*) highlighting the need to view Ahalya as a woman caught in the intersections of desire, power, and patriarchy rather than just a symbol of punishment. This sympathetic retelling is consistent with feminist literary techniques that aim to break down the stigma attached to female sexuality in canonical works, confronting "the patriarchal ideology that seeks to repress and control female sexuality through myth and tradition" (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 2013).

Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* is a far more extensive and aggressive account. Rather than portraying Ahalya as a passive character, Kane describes her as a bright, expressive woman who questioned the patriarchal institutions that penalized her for being a victim of Indra's deception and Gautam's harsh condemnation. "I was punished not for my sin, but for being a woman with desire" (Kane 112). Ahalya's voice says, denouncing the social inclination to regulate female sexuality and hold women accountable for the violence committed against them. #MeToo movement, which focuses on consent

and condemns victim-blaming, has given rise to a particularly prominent strand of modern feminist discourse that is echoed by this statement. According to Rosalind Gill, the movement calls for “a cultural shift in which women’s voices about sexual violation are believed, supported and taken seriously, rather than doubted, derided or dismissed” (Gill 3).

By utilizing Ahalya’s narrative, Kane’s book addresses the issues of consenting and dissenting, as well as social hypocrisy, by challenging patriarchal systems that deny women their ability to choose where they live and how they will use their bodies and minds. Kane emphasized in a webinar hosted by the Indian Women’s Writers Collective “give voice to women whose stories have been rewritten by patriarchal moralism, transforming victims into villains.” *Ahalya’s Awakening* is set in a larger cultural context that supports women’s rights and dignity because it engages directly with contemporary feminist thought.

Some scholarly critiques, like Leela Gandhi’s, contend that reexamining mythological female characters via a feminist lens makes it possible to “disrupt normative gendered narratives and reclaim female sexual agency.” This upheaval is illustrated by Kane’s depiction, which changes Ahalya from a cautionary tale into a representation of defiance against the control of women’s wants. Readers are encouraged to rethink the unfair stigma associated with Divakaruni’s portrayal of Ahalya, which places emphasis on compassion and spiritual fortitude. Kane’s retelling, on the other hand, is more extreme in its active questioning and undermining of patriarchal discourses surrounding consent and female sexuality. These stories, taken together, show the variety of feminist approaches used to reclaim Ahalya’s tale, which reflects broader changes in how women’s voices and experiences are portrayed in modern mythological literature.

Surpanakha: From Demonized Villain to Complex Victim-Rebel

In traditional Ramayana stories, Surpanakha’s character has always represented the ideal demoness, who is the embodiment of lust, mayhem, and feminine aggression that poses a threat to the patriarchal system. The epic’s subsequent war is justified by her disfigurement and humiliation at Lakshman’s hands, which also serves as a key turning point in the demonization of female sexuality and agency. But this simplistic demonization portrays Surpanakha as the scapegoat for male violence and political strife, thereby silencing her voice and dehumanizing her.

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni humanizes Surpanakha by examining her history, wants, and the social and political environment that influences her conduct. Divakaruni’s Surpanakha is a woman torn between her responsibilities to her family and the anguish of unreciprocated love, in contrast to the demoness of popular mythology. She is described in the book as “a fierce, proud woman, wounded not only by rejection but also by a world that refused to listen to her” (Divakaruni 326). This image entices readers to identify with Surpanakha’s fragility behind her strong outside. In an interview with *The Times of India* in 2019, Divakaruni said that she wants to “challenge the demonization of women who defy social norms, especially those who express desire openly.” Her depiction is consistent with feminist studies that question how mythology sometimes encodes misogyny by associating female sexual expression with moral transgression. As Uma Narayan argues, “Women’s sexuality is often portrayed as dangerous and in need of control, particularly when it does not conform to the roles of wife or mother sanctioned by patriarchal norms” (Narayan 133). By restoring Surpanakha’s voice and motivations, Divakaruni destabilizes the simplistic binary of good woman versus evil woman.

Divakaruni throws off the basic binary of good versus bad woman by bringing back Surpanakha's voice and intentions. Placing Surpanakha at the center of the tale as a fully realized protagonist, Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* presents a more extreme reimagining. Rather than demonizing Surpanakha, Kane paints her as a bright, politically savvy woman who is making her way in a patriarchal and hostile society. "I was never the monster the world made me out to be. I was a woman fighting to survive," (*Lanka's Princess* 152.) foregrounding Surpanakha's sharp wit and strategic mind. This line is representative of Kane's feminist endeavor to reclaim and redefine demonized mythical women as agents of resistance rather than villains.

Kane's depiction aligns with current feminist discussions on intersectionality and overcoming oppression. "Women who transgress patriarchal boundaries are frequently punished by being labeled as 'other' or deviant, silencing their stories," according to bell hooks. The silence surrounding Surpanakha's story of trauma and revolt, which reveals the gendered violence at the heart of her mythical condemnation, is countered by the Princess of Lanka. Kane emphasized in an author discussion "reflects the experiences of many women whose voices are lost in the shadows of history and mythology, and through this novel, I wanted to give her a voice and a future" (JLF 2018). A central tenet of feminist revisionist mythology, which aims to rewrite stories to include those who have been historically excluded, is this emphasis on voice reclamation. Additionally, Surpanakha's metamorphosis from villain to victim-rebel is consistent with important feminist interpretations of mythology that highlight the politics of narrative authority, who gets to tell the tale, and how it affects societal views about gender. "The ability to narrate, or to prevent other narratives from taking shape and emerging, is a crucial dimension of symbolic power," as Anne McClintock puts it. This comparative analysis

shows how feminist approaches in modern mythological fiction are changing by contrasting Divakaruni's compassionate yet slightly constrained depiction with Kane's courageous and unapologetic reclamation.

Feminist Strategies: Emotion vs. Rebellion

Contemporary feminist interpretations of mythology use a variety of narrative techniques to reclaim and reinvent the voices of women who have been historically marginalized. In their works, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane represent two separate yet complementary feminist viewpoints that mirror wider trends in feminist literary criticism. Divakaruni's feminist approach is based on emotional realism, which is a thorough and compassionate investigation into her characters' inner worlds. Her stories highlight the psychological and spiritual aspects of women's experiences, emphasizing endurance, healing, and self-understanding as forms of understated opposition. For example, in *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita's tale is presented with great emotional nuance, highlighting the inner fortitude needed to endure betrayal, exile, and social condemnation. Similarly, the depictions of Urmila, Ahalya, and Surpanakha are filled with pathos and compassion, encouraging readers to empathize with their plight without expressing explicit rage or blame. Feminist ideas that identify emotional labor and resilience as potent but sometimes neglected kinds of agency are consistent with this approach. As Sara Ahmed asserts, 'emotions do things' by shaping bodies, boundaries, and ways of being, and they "play a crucial role in the surfacing of individual and collective politics" (Ahmed, 12). Divakaruni's feminism encourages an environment in which healing becomes a revolutionary act by paying close attention to emotions of pain, love, and forgiveness.

Furthermore, Divakaruni's writings frequently incorporate spiritual feminist viewpoints, highlighting individual change and

resilience in the face of patriarchal violence. Her characters' journeys are more about seeking inner peace and redemption than about overt confrontation. "There is power in patience, in enduring injustice with grace, which is also a form of rebellion," (Divakaruni, *The Hindu*). This strategy aligns with feminist research that emphasizes the role of narratives of survival and emotional authenticity in reclaiming women's stories. As Pramod K. Nayar puts it, "the ethical task of feminist life-writing is not simply to expose violence but to affirm survival as a political act" (45).

On the other hand, Kavita Kane's feminist approach is distinguished by strong confrontation and intellectual rebellion. Her novels not only empathize with the suffering of legendary women but also actively examine and question the social and moral norms that support their oppression. Kane's characters express their wants, complaints, and resistance openly while challenging the patriarchal systems that either make them invisible or portray them as villains. For instance, in Ahalya's *Awakening*, Ahalya vocally denounces the injustice of victim-blaming and asserts her sexual agency: "I was punished not for my sin, but for being a woman with desire" (112). This exemplifies a feminist rejection of silence as submission. Likewise, *Sita's Sister* examines marital neglect and the emotional work that is expected of women, while *Lanka's Princess* portrays Surpanakha as a politically astute rebel rather than a stereotypical demoness.

Through direct criticism and advocacy, Kané's narrative voice is closely aligned with third-wave feminism and intersectional critiques that highlight the need to break down repressive social conventions. Kimberlé Crenshaw asserts that "intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects" (Crenshaw, 1245), a framework that Kané's narratives reflect as they navigate the complex interplay between gender, power, and myth.

Because her retellings engage with current feminist discussions on consent, bodily autonomy, and identity politics, her revision of mythology is highly relevant to ongoing social and political discussions. In this regard, Kané's work reflects feminist scholars like bell hooks, who contends that "feminist willingness to change direction when needed has been a major source of strength and vitality in feminist struggle" (hooks, xiv). By incorporating such perspectives, Kané not only retells ancient stories but also reclaims them for modern resistance against systemic injustice.

These two writers, working together, illustrate the variety of feminist revisionist myth-making. Divakaruni's feminism may be seen as representing an ethics of care and emotional redemption, in which comprehension and patience softly but thoroughly undermine patriarchal narratives. By directly confronting norms and advocating for the recognition and justice that excluded women deserve, Kane's strategy embodies intellectual defiance and a politics of resistance. By demonstrating that emotional realism and confrontational rebellion are both essential for completely reimagining and reclaiming mythic women's narratives, this dichotomy enhances feminist literary practice. Divakaruni and Kane help to establish a dynamic and expanding feminist mythology by embracing these various approaches. This mythology revisits old texts while also addressing current battles for gender equality, identity acceptance, and narrative sovereignty in a compelling way.

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