

“Representation of Feminism in Grand Narratives of Ramayana and Mahabharata in the Select Indian English Novels of Githa Hariharan and Kavita Kane”

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Abstract

The Two ancient epics that have impacted on the spirituality and culture of India are the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. They have been reflected and re-written by the modern writers and given a new outlook to their themes that hold permanent relevance. The works present feminist, postcolonial, and critical reinterpretation of old works that address contemporary issues of identity, gender, power, and social justice. This paper evaluates Githa Hariharan as a feminist reinterpretation, and Kavita Kane as a marginalized thinking in order to understand how these epics have been modified in modern Indian English literature. The paper examines how female characters and the marginalized voices are depicted in such reinterpretations and reflects on the enduring relevance of these classical stories and contests their classic interpretations.

Keywords: Narratives, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Marginalized, Portrayal, Gender.

Introduction:

Ramayana and *Mahabharata* are the main epics that shape the Indian culture, religious and intellectual life to a great extent. Full of myth, morality, and spirituality,

their tales continue to be heard throughout the generations to influence the religious activities and the creative and literary expressions. Their monumental epics with their intricate portrayal of valour, divine intervention, human conflict and assumptions about moral issues are great sources of knowledge about the human experience. With the Indian modernization and the development of English literature, these sacred texts took a new meaning in the framework of Indian English literature and allowed writers to re-create and re-interpret these stories about new concerns.

In her reinterpretation of ancient epics, Githa Hariharan often stresses the importance of women and their voices, which are oppressed, which adds a modern feminist touch to the plots. The works of Kavita Kane and in particular her retellings of the stories of women in the *Mahabharata* are writings that highlight the storyline of the epic with a new twist of taking into focus the forgotten tales and other angles of the story.

Literature Review

Sivaranjani G (2019) found *Sita's* remarkable beauty and appealing feminine qualities, while the same *Sita* is depicted in a contrasting manner as the valiant warrior of *Mithila* in Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*. Sanika Kulkarni (2020) remarked the inception of retellings in mythology during the early modern period and examined the gradual evolution of these narratives over time, noting the transformations that occurred with each iteration. Parmar (2021) explored the reception of the ancient epic and its myriad narratives and characters as interpreted by contemporary readers in their modern forms. Laxmanbhai (2022) talked about the commencement of the retelling of mythical narratives in post-independence India. The mythology of India, particularly that of *Hindu* origin, constitutes a profound and intricate legacy of the nation, with many individuals possessing familiarity with its narratives, regardless of their personal beliefs. Dikshit (2023) analyzed the varied viewpoints on significant events and figures, highlighting the profound diversity of beliefs and traditions among different communities, and underscoring the evolving essence of these epics as vibrant cultural phenomena. Halder (2024) highlighted that the universal allure of the stories resides in the manner of their narration. Altering the narrative perspective to focus on specific and humanizing traits of the *Gods* has transformed the way in which readers and viewers understand them.

Research Methodology

The present study is based on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include the select novels of Githa Hariharan and Kavita Kane, while the secondary sources consist of scholarly articles, critical essays, books, newspapers,

and authentic online resources. The main objective of this paper is to examine the representation of feminism within grand narratives as reimagined in the works of these two authors.

Limitations of the Study

This study analyzes the depiction of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in the writings of Githa Hariharan and Kavita Kane, while recognizing many limits that influence its scope and conclusions. The work can be criticized by the fact that it focuses on English-language retellings thus overlooking regional and oral alterations of the epics. It focuses on gender and feminist reinterpretations, but the numerous intersections of gender and caste among other identities are not studied in detail.

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992)- A Feminist Reimagining

Githa Hariharan reenacts the great narratives of the *Mahabharata* and other mythological traditions as a way of anticipating the muted voices of the women. She also contrasts the modern-day female experiences with those of mythological characters like *Amba*, *Gandhari* and *Draupadi* through the character of *Devi*, *Sita* and *Mayamma*, thus revealing the patriarchal nature of the myth and the society. In her demystification, she illustrates the contrast between the ideal image of women in the epics-as goddesses or agents of virtue-and the reality of what happened to be the lives of women, which was one of being subjugated and sacrificed. The novel can be therefore referred to as feminist intervention and to question the mainstream perception of reading the epics and reclaim the voice of women and their agency and resistance on the cultural memory of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

Simultaneously, this myth by Hariharan is not only a refusal, but also a reclamation tactic, as the author provides women with other ways of defining their strength, resilience, and identity. By intertwining personal stories with mythological retellings, she forms a dialogue between the past and the present, tradition and modernity as a result of which her protagonists are able to view their struggles as those within a greater continuum of female resistance. Thus, *The Thousand Faces of Night* makes a new definition of the role of epics-not as rigid holders of patriarchal principles but as texts that can be reread through a feminist prism.

Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013) - A Feminist Retelling The book *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen* by Kavita Kane (2013) is a feminist reinterpretation of the *Mahabharata* by showing the disregarded story of a

key figure of the epic, the wife of *Karna*, who is often overlooked in traditional versions of the epic. In this, she explains the emotional and mental journey of *Uruvi* as she completes her role as a wife of *Karna*, who is one of the most tragic characters in the epic. The novel presents a new perspective of the *Mahabharata* by re-focusing on the female aspect instead of the male-dominated story, giving prominence to the empowerment, endurance and independence of *Uruvi*. Such reinterpretation by Kane challenges the patriarchal structures of the epic, as *Uruvi* is introduced as a woman who violates the common structures and prejudices of her position as an outcast. She is not a passive looking character but a strong, intelligent, and independent individual whose love to *Karna* is total and complex, based on the cruelty of reality around her and the stigma of her marriage. The novel deals with a devotion, sacrifice and the social restriction to women and gives *Uruvi* a voice that in traditional readings of the *Mahabharata* has traditionally been one-sided.

In *Karna, wife* Kane revisits the role of a marginal figure into an essential protagonist in the *Karna's Wife*, where the author, in a compelling and empowering feminist twist, re-tells the story and focuses on the emotional depth of the women in the epic. Kane highlights the inner world of *Uruvi* and gives the ancient text a modern sensibility and brings light into the dilemma of women both in ancient and modern times.

Sita Sisters (2014) by Kavita Kane is a feminist version of the *Ramayana* that shows a new way of thinking about the story by narrating about *Urmila*, the lesser-known sister of *Sita*. It is in this story that Kane presents the voice of *Urmila*, one of the heroines who at times tends to be overshadowed by her more glamorous sister, *Sita*. The book is devoted to the emotional experience which *Urmila* passes through, her tremendous love to her sister, and the sufferings that she experiences in the midst of the thick and thin of *Sita* and her exile. The character of *Sita* is an exemplary wife and daughter in the *Ramayana* and the tale of *Urmila* also illustrates the silent sacrifices and interior dilemma of a woman who in majority of cases is kept at the fringe. Kane presents the themes of devotion, sacrifice and perseverance through *Urmila*. The story includes the feeling of isolation of *Urmila* who is left in the palace when *Sita* and her husband, *Rama*, go into exile, and her internal agony as she quietly approves the fate of her sister. Kane redefines the character of *Urmila* as a devoted wife to *Lakshmana*, who also has to cope with exile and portrays her as a strong and dignified character, who endured the hardships without any recognition. *Sita Sister* is a feminist reinterpretation of the *Ramayana*, which gives more voice to *Urmila* and acknowledges the unrecognized voices of women in the epic. The story of Kane

displays a sophisticated understanding of the complex life of women, who occupy the margins of more famous personalities, their silent strength, and their depth of feelings and emotions.

Githa Hariharan, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994) is a contemplative story. Hariharan uses the myth, folklore, and fable as the means of narration to raise questions of tradition, power, and personal change, the topics that are echoed by feminist interpretations of the grand narratives. Although education and teacher-student relationship are the main theme of the novel, she often uses the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* stories to criticize the hierarchical society that suppresses the voices of marginalized people including women. The myths do not lie down as undisputable facts; they are re-formulated to challenge the codes of ethics and gender thought processes they propagate. She combines personal recollection, oral narratives, and allusions to epic to construct a dialogic space where the repressed voices especially those of women come out against the burden of canonical tradition and this makes the novel conform to a feminist reworking of the Indian cultural narratives. In addition, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* depicts the way storytelling as such emerges as a resistance and re-telling method. Imprinting epic stories into the thoughtful process of the teacher, Hariharan emphasizes the strength of narratives to question traditional wisdom and to re-write the memories of the community. This is a process that results in destabilization of authority of the grand narratives and also opens possibilities of other readings which look into the future through empathy possibilities, inclusiveness, and recognition of silenced identities- especially the women who are at the periphery of the epics.

Contemporary Perspectives: Feminist and Postcolonial Revisions of Traditional Narratives

In modern-day literature, nowadays, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are being reinterpreted and re-examined through feminist and postcolonial lenses so as to give a more holistic and critical picture of narratives in the present day. The feminist revisions are to reinstate a voice of the silenced female characters like *Urmila*, *Draupadi* and *Uruvi*, who is usually portrayed to be passive in the original versions. Githa Hariharan and Kavith Kane, among writers, have shown such women as strong and multifaceted characters and make significant choices and fight against the traditional gender power relations. The revisions of postcolonialism consider the influence of colonialism in the understanding and sharing of these texts. They play with the epics to confront colonial histories and the western values, and, at the same

time, express cultural resilience. Also, contemporary versions feature the themes of marginalized voices, such as lower-caste and subaltern characters, that shed light on the injustices they experienced in the original tales. Intersectionality is very significant since contemporary adaptations are in the perspective of the way in which classes, caste, gender, and regional identities converge to shape the experiences of characters. These re-telling challenge the one-dimensional narratives and the presence of exclusivity by emphasizing the impact of social hierarchies on moral and political decisions. The adaptation of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics in the present-day world in a feminist and postcolonial perspective enables the introduction of voices that have been disregarded, the enhancement of the comprehension of identity and influence, and a more elaborate and practical understanding of the two ancient epics in contemporary society.

Concluding Remarks

This research paper will look at the way the grand narratives of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have been reflected in some works by Githa Hariharan and Kavita Kane. The authors provide unique and rather complicated reinterpretations of these religious texts and provide contemporary opinions which can be heard in connection with the evolving cultural, social and political context of India of the present times.

The analysis by Hariharan and Kane highlights how female voices that have been sidelined in these epics can be restored using the feminist reinterpretations. By not centering the story around the main male characters, and focusing on women such as *Draupadi*, *Urmila*, and *Uruvi*, these authors give rather subtle descriptions of women who, even though they are often the weaker sex in more traditional versions, come out as complex, empowered, and driven characters. These reinterpretations give new insights into the roles of women in the epics and they also disrupt patriarchal structures that have historically oppressed their depiction.

Future Scope for Research

The second wave of research might focus on exploring how the modern writers cope with these texts to solve some modern problems such as nationalism, gender equality and social justice and make valuable contributions to the idea of how to reconcile the old values and the new ones. Such great characters as *Draupadi*, *Uruvi*, *Sita* and *Urmila* are accompanied by such minor characters, which leads to the necessity to research them and make them independent personalities, who have overcome the stereotypes of womanhood as wives and mothers.

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