DEPICTION OF FEMALE-SEXUALITY IN *THE FISHER QUEEN'S DYNASTY*: A CRITICAL STUDY

Reema Devi & Priya Raghav*

Abstract: Kavita Kané has picked out a sensitive issue of female sexuality from one of the most influential Indian epics, the Mahabharata, for her novel The Fisher Queen's Dynasty. It records Satyavati's- the queen of Hastinapur- move to establish a matriarchal empire on the soil of the patriarchal system. Kane retells and reframes Satyavati's story from a female perspective. She is marginalized, abandoned in infancy by her biological father, and raised in a fishing community. The community in the novel represents an impoverished and destitute class. Satyavati uses her sexuality at a young age to secure a dignified place for herself and authoritatively employs her power over the other two women in her relationship. The use of female sexuality as a tool made her attain a power of dominance, which created a structure of unprecedented historical events in the Indian culture. She allows her body to be used to secure a privileged place in society. Thus, the paper aims to examine her character by applying theories and interpretations of the objectification of female sexuality.

Introduction

Women in ancient Indian literature have been depicted in various images, such as goddesses, mothers, and sisters. *Rigveda* itself identifies the goddess Aditi as the mother of all. Her blessings are sought for protection from distress and suffering. In subsequent literature, her image as a mother has been preserved. She is seen as the mother of Varunas, Mitra, Aditya, Indra, Rudras, kings, and many great sons. *Atharva Veda* and *Vajasaneyi Samhita* depict references to her as a mighty, powerful, protective, and guiding figure. She is depicted as a redeemer as men seek her blessings to eliminate their guilt. It is evident from ancient literature surveys that motherly figures are highly revered. The other aspect of women's role has been seen as wives. The Indian scriptures hold an entirely different view of a wife. It ensures that she obeys society's norms (exclusively for women). The traditional view of women is that they should be controlled and regulated; otherwise, they may become dangerous to the social system. Robin Rinehart writes his opinions in *Contemporary Hinduism* that women in Indian scriptures are perceived as equal to *shudras,* whose primary role is to serve their superiors. He quotes provisions provided for Hindu women in the *Manusmriti*, "The Laws of Manu state that women are due great respect and that men must provide for them, but also that women must be obedient to their fathers, husbands, and their sons." (Rinehart, 2004)

He underscores women's position in the social hierarchy, where women remain at the lowest level on the ladder of the hierarchical order, almost equal to the lower castes. It seems as if there is a social contract between women and patriarchy, as the patriarchal structure sets guidelines for women. According to the patriarchal norms, women deserve respect and honor if and only if they remain in the defined area for them. Stepping out of the limit brings disgrace to them. This strict code of conduct applies to all women, whether daughters or wives. Their independent individuality does not find any space in the social system. The religious orthodoxy imposes on them the responsibility of following a virtuous life. Their sacrifices and silent sufferings have been eulogized and celebrated in the ancient Indian text.

* REEMA DEVI, Research Scholar, Department of English, School of Humanities & Social Sciences Lingaya's Vidyapeeth (Deemed to be University), Faridabad, Haryana, Email: reemadevi6438@gmail.com; Dr. PRIYA RAGHAV, Research Supervisor, Associate Professor, Department of English, School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Lingaya's Vidyapeeth (Deemed to be University), Faridabad, Haryana, Email: priyaraghav@lingayasvidyapeeth.edu.in.

It helps to serve an illustrative motive in favor of patriarchy. Women are to be honored and revered in situations in which their sexuality is under control, especially as mothers. Women are considered dangerous when not guarded by a male because, according to the dharma texts, they are easily corruptible and inclined toward lust and malice.

The argument is suggestive of considering women as corruptive creatures who need constant watch by a representative of male dominance. Using the thread, modern writers show concern for the social system's discriminative and punitive nature. They have been trying to revisit and restudy the texts critically, applying various approaches to a conclusion. Such is an attempt made by Kavita Kané in the field of myth-fiction. After examining the Indian epic *Mahabharata* from the feminist view, she has concluded that the epic deserves some analytical perspective to highlight the plight of some female characters who have been marginalized or given less importance. Her novels are based on the Indian mythological female figures who need to be heard from their perspective. For this purpose, she has recently contributed to Indian literature with myth-fiction and new perspectives. She has brought the women from the periphery to the centre stage with the focal light.

I. Satyavati in *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*

The Fisher Queen's Dynasty, one of her best novels, highlights a woman's struggle against patriarchy who strives to carve a dignified place for herself. She is known in the epic by the name Satyavati, the matriarchal figure who places on the patriarchal throne, matriarchal heirs. Satyavati is the protagonist of the novel. She is the adopted daughter of a fisherman, Dasharaj. Dasharaj's sister Adrika was in love with the Chedi king Uparichara Vasu. King made her love and left. Later, she gave birth to twins - a boy and a girl. The King kept the boy and gave the girl to Dasharaj. Dasharaj raised her with fatherly affection and care. He freed her from the bondage of female sexuality. He allowed her to be skilled in their community profession. She used to ferry boats to earn her livelihood. However, she seldom accepted her lowly status because of her birth as a princess. Her biological father abandoned her. Her upbringing in the fishermen's community established her identity with a marginalized community. She despised her unworthy status.

Hence, she was a disappointed person. She had another strong reason for her disappointment with herself. Her body emanated a fish-like smell, due to which people avoided her. She felt like an untouchable whose presence gave people an unpleasant feeling. She wanted to get rid of the endless miseries of poor life. She was more conscious of her individuality and was an ambitious girl. She tried to move out of the life of mud. From birth to her young age, she brooded her identity.

II. Satyavati's Acknowledgement of Her Female Sexuality

Satyavati was aware of her power as a woman. She recognized her power with her female sexuality. *Rish*i Parashara once visited Dasharaj when he wanted to cross the river. Dasharaj agreed and entrusted Satyavati with the duty. Satyavati's physical beauty, body, extraordinary femininity, and robust character overpowered him. His senses were aroused, and he proposed to Satyavati with a sexual favor. Satyavati was aware of the rishi's mystic powers and female power. She asked him to turn her body's fish-like smell into a fragrance. Parashara fulfilled her desire immediately by making her a fragrant, emitting young girl. He said, "Matsyagandha will now be Yojanagandha; your new, musky fragrance will waft for miles together and shall entice anyone you want." She also acknowledged the consequences of losing her virginity. She expressed her fear of immodest favors for him. Understanding her apprehension, Prashara blessed her with the boon to remain a virgin even after consummating the moment with him. Subsequently, she surrendered her body to him. She felt a sudden transformation in her body and individuality. Her body was emitting a fragrance that could be

felt from a distance. She realized a new individual in her body who was more powerful and magnificent.

Thus, Satyavati successfully availed the opportunity to strengthen herself. She turned to be an opportunist as she realized the appropriateness of the moment, and it was in her favor. Her physical encounter with the sage was a turning point in her life. She became more powerful, confident, and proud of her physical strength. Generally, women are perceived as vulnerable because of their physical structure.

III. Satyavati's Disassociation with Traditional Views

Manusmriti prohibits women from privately meeting with another man except for her husband. It instructs society to put control over women and draw lines for them that must not be crossed. Otherwise, they would receive social condemnation. Dasharaj, her foster father, understands her desires and ambitions very well. He plotted a suitable atmosphere with the rishi so that she could obtain strength and create a new way for her journey to becoming a queen. He recognized her potential, her capability, and her indomitable spirit.

Satyavati's sexual encounter with Parashara was not out of her choice but circumstantial. She had to succumb to the male desire as he was a rishi with a spiritual power who could curse her. She consented to his passion in defence of saving herself from the ascetic wrath. Satyaavti acted smartly and employed momentous weakness with wisdom. She turned down the social order of patriarchy with her actions. She controlled the situation and created a new personality. The rishi acknowledged her extraordinary personality. He recognized her unconventional nature and blessed her with the future of a princess. He said, "You are an extraordinary girl yourself. You can never be bound by conventions or be tied down by others. You were born to rule, princess.

Also, Satyavati never regretted the unwelcome moment of her life. Even her acquiescence in abandoning the newborn seldom proved her weakness. She willingly abandoned the child and left. The episode confirms the practicality of her mind. She knew her mind and her goal very well. It reflects her assertive individuality. Instead of becoming a prey of man's lust, she strengthened her femaleness. By excelling in femininity, she formed an unyielding personality. The contract with the rishi made her more assertive and dominant. Satyavati was aware of social norms for a woman before surrendering herself to the rishi. The physical union brought a new person in her with a new experience of womanhood. In Kané's words, "She had transformed: from a young and innocent girl to a woman who was aware of her sexuality, and her power over men." (Kané, 2017)

IV. Satyavati's Compromised Feminist Outlook

The episode divulges Satyavati's secret desire to rule the world. She assured her triumph and surrendered to the *rishi*'s will. Kané, in her text, writes, "…she surrendered, finally and triumphantly, to him." (Ibid.)

Simultaneously, the novel depicts a woman's mockery of men's lust for women's bodies. Satyavati had a dark complexion that gave her Kali identity. Satyavati sarcastically remembered the rishi's weak moment wherein she recognized her body as a trophy for him. She felt the charismatic influence of his passion on her body, identity, and individuality. It entrusted her with power and control over her individual. The novel portrays Satyavati as not a mere woman; she is an independent individual who can turn adversity into an opportunity to empower herself.

> She was a virgin again; Kali smiled with a curl of her lips, though not as chaste as social norms dictate, she thought. She could not care less; she could not help but laugh at how that sheer skin was considered a trophy for men to want and venerate. It had freed her: she had power and control over her life and love.

The change in her personality turned out to be an advantageous deal as she found her admirers and her control over their minds. She selected her prey and played with their perspective of the objectivity of the female body. She did not repent for the decisions she made in Parashara's company. The novel notes her endeavor to create her path in her own way.

> She sought and selected her admirers as if she were picking the best fish in the basket: not using her status as the chief's daughter, but her power as a desirable woman. Kali found that she was rediscovering herself, unrepentant and unapologetic about her deeds and her decisions. Desire did not shame her, nor did lust overawe her. After the episode with Parashara, she knew it was her sharpest weapon to cleave and carve a better life for herself.

Though Satyavati felt the triumph she exchanged with her body, she also felt the sharp pain of losing her innocence. The circumstances made her compromise with the situation. However, she found the force of manly passion in her body unsound.

As Kané writes, "She became aware of a sharp stone grinding into her spine, but it was nothing compared to the pain she experienced when he thrust himself into her body violently, with fevered passion. She gasped. It was momentary, but unbeknown, she would feel the ache all through her life. She had lost her innocence to gain freedom." The freedom from her stinking smell cost her to lose her modesty.

V. Satyavati as a Revolutionary

In an exchange of words, Satyavati informed her father about the incident. He took it positively as he knew the rishi's intention ab initio for his visit to their hut. He knew she was destined to produce an illustrious son for him. The daughter and father shared the miseries of their poor life in the marginalized community, which stimulated their minds to overcome adversity. Satyavati's female sexuality was used as a weapon against patriarchal ideals. Here, one can observe the mixing of the burdensome terms power, politics, and sexuality. The rishi wanted sexual favors to procure a male child from a strong, courageous, and untamed woman. Satyavati wanted to acquire a new physical strength that inspired a woman to extend her femininity. She also aspired to challenge the social system wherein marginalized communities are treated discriminately. She wanted to remove the social injustice that she had experienced in the streets of fishermen. The unclean, unhygienic, and unnoticed difficulties of the community where she was raised were her significant concerns. Satyavati was aware of her intelligence. She was able to solve village problems and actively participated in financial negotiations in the fish market. Additionally, she raised her voice against her community's poor and unheard people. Her administrative skills later turned out to be an advantage for her.

The scholars Kapila Joshi and Kaushal Kishore Sharma write in their article "Dreams, Desires, and Destiny in The Fisher Queen's Dynasty by Kavita Kané" (Joshi & Sharma, 2023, 691-696) that Satyavati longs for dominance, safety, and a bright future for her family. To establish an illustrious lineage, she compromised with her female sexuality. Her bold decision shaped the course of the Mahabharata, the Indian epic.

VI. Satyavati as a Queen, a Powerful Woman

The subsequent narrative of the novel highlights her other encounter with King Shantanu. Overpowered by her fragrance, Shantanu followed the path in the direction it flowed from. He met her and fell in love with her. He wanted her desperately. Her influence on him was so strong that he proposed to her to marry him. Satyavati was conscious of her beauty, charm, and female power. She first played with his emotions and ensured his desperation to obtain her body. She managed to make him approach her father with the motive of a marriage proposal. Dasharaj rejected it when the king did not acquiesce to his condition of declaring his

and Satyavati's firstborn as an heir apparent. Again, dynamics of power, politics, and sexuality seem to get a firm hold on the lives of people. Later, Devavrata, Shantanu's son from Ganga, arranged their wedding by giving a terrible vow of lifetime celibacy. Thus, Satyavati became the queen of Hastinapur. She played an active role in politics and administration with Devavrata's assistance. Devavrata was known as Bhishma for his oath. Satyavati displayed her prowess in all spheres of her life.

VII. Satyavati reflects Patriarchal Mindset for Using Female Sexuality

Shantanu's death made her more alert and conscious in the game of power. She had two sons with Shantanu - Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. The untimely death of both her sons broke her temporarily as she was left heirless, thus unable to avoid anarchy in her kingdom. Her two daughters-in-law, the wives of Vichtravirya, were childless widows. The most challenging task of producing heirs for the kingdom was the sole mission of her life. Ultimately, she approached Bhishma with the plea to produce an heir through *niyoga* with her daughters-in-law for the kingdom. In ancient Indian society, *niyoga* was prevalent to save the kingdom from not having a ruler. Under the practice, the family members unanimously select a virtuous man to have sex with the widow or woman whose husband was incapable of producing heirs. The practice is accepted in the Law of Manu, which later lost its ground.

Bhishma rejected the idea because of his oath. Moreover, the women disagreed with Satyavati's decision. Initially, they refused to obey her, but Satyavati convinced them to cooperate and execute the task. At last, she remembered her rewedding son Vyasa. She called upon him to perform *niyoga* on Vichitravirya's wives. He accepted and gave three sons to her. However, her daughters-in-law Ambika and Ambalika were horrified by the physical encounter with Vyasa. Their behavor disturbed her, and she instructed her elder wife to repeat the same. However, the bottom line is that she established her right on the throne of Hastinapur through the progeny from *Niyoga*.

VIII. Theoretical Interpretation of Satyavati's Character

Kavita Kané, through the narratives in the life of female characters, highlights the issue of objectification of their female bodies. Their sexuality is used either to satisfy male desires or to serve political purposes. Satyavati's own decision to have sex with the rishi was motivated by the desire to gain power and control over the outer world. She was the first person to use her body as an instrument to serve her purpose. In the second episode, her contact with Shatanu proved another turning point when her father negotiated for her body to empower her and his community. In the third episode, Ambika and Ambalika are forced to have sex with a stinky and ugly man. They were compelled to make a physical union to procure heirs for the Kuru dynasty. The novel loosely depicts the women's partial acceptance of participating in *niyoga* in anticipation of receiving Bhishma in bed. However, things went the opposite, and in fear, their performance, in the words of Vyasa, was not appropriate. His statement reflects his anticipation of mutual love between the two parties; however, the rule of niyoga dismisses such behavor, indicating enjoyment of the procedure.

The argument is that Satyavati, a woman, should have understood her daughter-in-law's apprehension. If the Hindu scriptures expect fidelity from women, then how can women give their willingness for sex with a stranger? Another point is that after gaining power and becoming an efficient politician, Satyavati herself epitomized patriarchy. Her decisions were politically motivated, not from a female's heart. She repeated the same course of action of objectifying the female sexuality of other women. Thus, it can be concluded that power hegemony is noticeable even in the matriarchal structure. The shift of power from patriarchy to matriarchy perhaps cannot change the fate of the subordinates. Here, Ambika and Ambalika are the victims of the game of power and patriarchy. They were abducted and brought to Hastinapur and made brides of Vichitravrya.

IX. Satyavati and Theories of Self-Affirmation, Objectification and Sexual Objectification

Satyavati's first sexual encounter with the rishi can be examined under two different theories- one is self-affirmation and psychology of self-defence, and the second is sexual objectification.

Self-affirmation, as David K. Sherman and Geoffrey L. Cohen in their paper titled "The Psychology of Self-Défense: Self-Affirmation Theory," refers to Steele's self-affirmation theory. According to this, the self-system protects "the image of its self-integrity, moral and adaptive adequacy." People react to restore self-worth when the mechanism finds a threat to its self-integrity. Further, they highlight the workings of the defence mechanism, which is a reaction to the threat to self-integrity. This reaction could be rational and defensible. The primary purpose is to remove the threat and restore self-worth. It is expected that the responses can be conscious or unconscious. Thus, applying the theory of self-affirmation and defensive mechanism, it can be concluded that what Satyavati found suitable in the bizarre situation with Parashara was her reaction to the threat to her integrity. She tried to restore or repair that loss through the boons she sought from the Rishi. Being a woman, it was her right to protect her integrity and restore her space in the socio-cultural setting.

In an article titled "Objectification Theory, Self-Objectification, and Body Image," initially published in the *Encyclopaedia of Body Image and Human Appearance* authored by RM Calogero, the views on the theory of objectification have been expressed explicitly. According to the RM Calogero, "To objectify is to make into and treat something that is not an object as an object, which can be used, manipulated, controlled, and known through its physical properties." (Calogero, 2012) Applying the same formula to the objectification of women's bodies, it presents the idea that women are identified by their bodies, not by their individuality. They are displayed on social platforms as objects to please men's minds. Further, it can be said that women are seen as objects of gratification that can be molded, controlled, and manipulated as per their purposes, either politically motivated or conventionally labeled.

Calogero also talks about sexual objectification. For her, "sexual objectification refers to the fragmentation of a woman into a collection of sexual parts and/or sexual functions, essentially stripping her of a unique personality and subjectivity so that she exists as merely a body." (Ibid.)

She argues that self-objectification is the perception of seeing the self from a third-person perspective instead of seeing the self from a first-person perspective. She illustrates that girls or women see their outward looks from others' points of view. In the novel, Satyavati's action of exposing her body to Shanatanu and making him a passionate lover reflects her image of objectifying her sexuality. She reveals her body parts to him in fragments as she wants him to pine for her body desperately, thereby approaching her father with the marriage proposal.

> Kali permitted him a long look of her magnificent bare breasts before she stepped back in apparent confusion, coyly pulling up her fallen uttariya to cover herself. (The Fisher Queen's Dynasty)

Satyavati told her father about the episode regarding her meeting with Shantanu. She divulged to him how she made him the follower of her body. She did this only to entice him. The following statement reflects her strategy to tempt him, "He thinks he did, but it's I who is enticing him." (*The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*)

In the later episode of the novel, Satyavati's decision to get heirs through Ambika and Ambalika's bodies displays an ideal of dominance over subordinates. The relationship between superior and subordinate allowed Satyavati to have authority over her daughters-in-law's bodies. She controlled their bodies by manipulating them by enlisting their familial duties. She pleaded to willingly have sex with the appointed man for the sake of the kingdom.

Conclusion

Thus, the critical survey of the novel *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* highlights different stages in women's lives under a compartmental social system. Being subordinate human beings in society, women develop a self-defensive mechanism to protect or restore their self-integrity. The in-depth study of Satyavati's action through a female's perception allows us to identify her struggle with male dominance. Her decisions to use her as well as her daughters-in-law's bodies were the product of politically motivated moves. She used female sexuality as a weapon to gain dominance over the dominant class. In the process of fighting with the influential beings, she internalized the very notion of patriarchy and dominance. Hence, it is concluded that Kavita Kané's depiction of female sexuality in the novel opens a new platform for discussion globally.

References

1. Calogero, Rachel M. 2012. *Objectification Theory, Self-objectification, and Body Image,* In: Cash, Thomas, ed. *Encyclopaedia of Body Image and Human Appearance*, Academic Press. 574-580.
2. Joshi, Kapila, and Kaushal Kishore Sharma. 2023. "Dreams, Desires, and Destiny in the Fisher Queen's Dynasty by Kavita Kane," *European Chemical Bulletin*, (12) 9: 691-696.
3. Kané Kavita. 2017. *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*. Westland Publications Ltd.
4. Mondal, Krishna Chatur, and Lavanya S. 2019. "Satyavati: The Enigmatic Woman in Kavita Kane's the Fisher Queen's Dynasty," *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, (23) 1: 295–301.
5. Nisha. 2018. "Desire, Sufferings and Wisdom: A Critical Study of Satyavati's Character from The Mahabharata," *Internal Journal of Creative Research Thought* (*IJCRT)*, (6): 569-573.
6. Shastri, Hargovind. 1953. *The Manusmriti*, Jai Krishna Das Haridas Gupt, the Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office.
7. "Niyoga." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 3 May 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niyoga#:~:text=Niyoga%20(Sanskrit%3A%20%E0%A4%A8%E0%A4%BF%E0%A4%AF%E0%A5%8B%E0%A4%97)%20was,another%20man%20or%20a%20woman.
8. Rinehart, Robin. 2004. *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture, and Practice*. ABC-CLIO.
9. Sherman, D. K., & Cohen, G. L. 2006. "The Psychology of Self-defence: Self-affirmation Theory," In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology.* (38) 183–242. Elsevier Academic Press.