

Breaking The Shadowy World Of Courtesans: Women, Myth, Music In Kavita Kane's *Menaka's Choice*

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ABSTRACT

Mythologies are primarily male-centered stories representing, upholding, and idealizing patriarchal norms and aspirations. Patriarchy regulates and controls women's sexuality through mythological stories. Females are frequently treated as property to be transferred or enjoyed by men. The objectification of women's bodies is a recurrent issue in mythologies throughout the world, including India. In Indian mythology, Apsaras, the eternal seductresses of Indra's court, are clear references to female objectification. Apsaras, despite their greater importance and might, are mentioned *only as passing characters* in Indian mythology. They were never allowed to speak on the main platform and tell their story. However, in her novel *Menaka's Choice*, Indian-English novelist Kavita Kane breaks this tradition by projecting the most beautiful and brilliant apsara of Indralok, Menaka as the protagonist.

Methodology: Qualitative Research that aims to gather and analyze non-descriptive data to gain an understanding of an individual's social reality including understanding their attitudes beliefs and motivation. The information for the Literature Review is gathered from many sources such as educational websites, peer-reviewed publications, and online sources.

Findings/Result: By offering a panoramic view of Menaka's existence, highlighting the character's goals, intentions, and aspirations, Kavita Kane uncovers the veil that patriarchy has placed on her character as a celestial seductress and recreates her as a woman of originality.

Keywords: Menaka; mythology; patriarchy; objectification; woman.

1. INTRODUCTION

The massive corpus of Indian ancient literature incorporates four *Vedas (Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva)* and each *Veda* is further divided into four parts viz., *Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka, and Upanishad*, six *Vedangas*, various *Dharmasutras*, eighteen *Mahapuranas* along with two Epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. With these literary texts available, it is not surprising to think about how ancient Indian texts afford to have such numerous stories about myths and legends. Mythology is a powerful force in society that creates and transmits social norms, communal ideals, and cultural representations. Myths are celebrated not as fiction or theories, but as essential elements of social life that will endure in perpetuity due to their universality. It is a powerful tool since mythology can mould a society's culture and consequently its general traits. The majority of mythical stories are predominantly male-centered narratives that represent, uphold, and idealise patriarchal values and expectations. Patriarchy has thus used mythology as a powerful instrument to solidify its position by highlighting and maintaining social hierarchy through a diverse cast of characters. The concept that male is universally the dominating gender and female is the subservient one has dominated mythological discussions of women. These narratives support patriarchal assumptions about women as the

"second sex" (Beauvoir S de 2015) by producing and propagating gender stereotypes. Mythology, as patriarchal ideological tales, generates images of women to be venerated and despised in society. "Under patriarchy, the female did not develop the symbols by which she is described," writes Kate Millet. Because both the primitive and the civilised worlds are male-dominated, the concepts that developed society regarding women were likewise male-dominated. Men constructed and shaped the image of women we know today to suit their wants" (Millet 1970). The same mythological stories are used by patriarchy to regulate and control women's sexuality. Females are frequently treated as male property to be traded or enjoyed. Misogynistic myths are built on the sexual supremacy of gods and heroic males over women, as well as violent sexual-based mythemes. The objectification of women's bodies is a recurrent issue in mythologies throughout the world, including India. In Indian mythology, Apsaras, the eternal seductresses of Indra's court, are clear references to female objectification.

2. BOOK SELECTED FOR STUDY

The book which is selected for the present paper is Kavita Kane's *Menaka's Choice*

3. OBJECTIVES

The present study tries to prove that

- a. Menaka has the bravery to criticise patriarchy's atrocities against women.
- b. Kane's depiction of another divine universe highlights the flaws in man-made mythology, which is ultimately patriarchal and misogynistic.

4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Lavanya R. Mohan aims to the novels *Sita's Sister* and *Menaka's Choice*. The novels portray the women characters were left with no choice except to obey the norms established by the male-dominated society. Both the novels explore the voice of the female characters Urmila and Menaka, who are placed within the margins of the patriarchal society where ideas are determined by men, and emerged to be dominant, as seen in ancient scriptures like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The female characters that stood at the bottom level did not get opportunities to voice their opinions and succumbed to the male voice. The researcher attempts to examine how Urmila and Menaka, the protagonists of the two novels raise their voices to assert their rights in a male-dominated society as in the ancient tales, these women characters were left with no choice but to perform the roles assigned to them by their male counterparts. Urmila is the wife of Prince Lakshmana whereas Menaka is an apsara in Indralok. In these works, a clash occurs between a dominant idea and the ideas diverging from the same dominant idea and questioning the former dominant idea consequently.

Sasikala M and G Bhuvanewari's paper carries out a meticulous exploration of the myths being created and criticised by men has compelled modern women writers to retell the myths from their perspective. Kavita Kane has tried to decode this gender consciousness through her novels. Menaka, Surpanaka, and Urmila, the minor but important characters in the epics who were designated to stay in the margin are pulled to the centre and are given space to express their desires and rights.

Shubhjit Nayak's study incorporates two novels namely *Menaka's Choice* and *Ahalya's Awakening*. In both of these novels, Indra appears as a character and his appearance alters the plot structure significantly. Driven by ego, jealousy, and insecurity for his position in heaven as well for his exquisite handsomeness he uses and exploits both the protagonists Menaka and Ahalya for his gains. The paper aims to exhibit the cunning ways and substandard exploits adopted by Indra.

Lakshmi Devi R explores how the voice of the quiet character from mythology stands up and questions the patriarchal notion of society. It explores the multi-level exploitation of women, their struggles, pains, and subjugation in a male-dominated society.

M. Asha and Dr. R.Nandhini document how Kavita Kane turns to Indian myths to establish a female literary tradition by rewriting the myths from the gynocentric point of view against the canonical literature in which women are derided as "alterity" or "otherness", "vulnerable", "second sex", "second forever", "subaltern" of man and "inferior" to man.

5. RESEARCH GAP

Women on earth and in heaven are both denied the right to express their aspirations. The apsaras are little more than gods' toys who have no rights of their own.

6. THE CELESTIAL COURTESANS, APSARAS

These celestial nymphs present at Indra's court are described in Indian mythology as immortal beauties capable of seducing mankind and gods alike. Apsaras are frequently dispatched to Earth on the orders of their master Devendra, the ruler of gods, to entice his opponents with the sensual beauty of these girls. Apsaras are the most efficient tools for Indra to defeat his foes, irrespective of being demons or ascetics because they are seductively attractive and perennially young.

Apsaras first appears in the Rig Veda, where Urvashi is listed as one of the many apsaras in Indra's court. Later epics such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Puranas add numerous references to them, naming and detailing many of them and their contributions to men's and gods' businesses. They're also identified as the spouses of Gandharvas, Indra's court musicians. They frequently dance to Gandharvas' music in the celestial palaces to amuse the gods. Despite their greater importance and power, apsaras appear exclusively in sub-stories or cameo parts in Indian mythical narratives, as they are never allowed to be the primary protagonist. Apsaras have never been allowed to tell their stories. However, in her novel *Menaka's Choice*, Indian-English novelist Kavita Kane breaks this tradition by projecting, the most beautiful and brilliant apsara of Indralok, Menaka, as the protagonist. By offering a panoramic perspective of Menaka's life and spotlighting the character's ambitions, intentions, and aspirations, Kane lowers the veil that patriarchy places on her as a seductress and recreates her as a woman of originality.

7. MENAKA IN THE MYTHOLOGIES

Having originated from Brahma's mind, Menaka or Menka is one of the most beautiful and clever of all the apsaras in Indralok, Indra assigns Apsaras to entertain rishis, devas, and gods. They perform dances to the Gandharvas' music. sometimes tasked with diverting the attention of rishis and asuras who, by their intense penance, constitute a serious threat to Gods. the apsaras are devoid of permanent love. They are not permitted to start their own family. Owing to the legendary stories it has been observed that the apsaras fall in love with mortals. However, it is limited to a particular period, after which they are summoned to Indralok by the King of Kings, Indra. Their love law is "make it and leave it."

Menaka is famous in Indian mythology for her two love stories. Vishwvasu, the Gandharva king who is the most attractive of all Gandharvas, even king Indra, and the Kama, the deva of love, was her true loves in heaven. Mramadavara was her son with Vishvasu, the Gandharva monarch. Pramadvava was an apsara, and her narrative is told in ancient scriptures. She was Menaka and Vishvasu's daughter. Menaka abandoned her near the ashram of Sthulakesha, the rishi who raised her. In the beginning, she deceived sage Vishwamitra, who was undertaking tapas to receive a boon from Lord Paramashiva to construct his cosmos. With time, the intensity of his Tapasya grew stronger, posing a threat to Indra because it would make Vishwamitra all-powerful, allowing him to easily conquer heaven. Menaka, the bewitchingly gorgeous apsara, was sent to earth by the clever Indra. Her mission was to seduce the sage and annihilate his Tapasya.

Menaka visited Vishwamitra in the forest, where he was performing rites and meditating. She began to sing and dance in front of him, and she prepared a fragrant flower garland to wear around his neck. Getting agitated by the actions of the apsara Vishwamitra opened his eyes, and his meditation was ruined. However, the enraged sage was quickly fascinated by Menaka's alluring beauty and proposed to marry her. Menaka accepted his proposal and they married since her goal was to undermine Vishwamitra's sagehood. Menaka and Vishwamitra had a daughter named Shakuntala. Menaka left the sage with the responsibility of her daughter and her task being completed, she returned to heaven.

8. REREADING THE TALE OF MENAKA

Menaka is traditionally described as a femme fatale who used her beauty to bewitch the sage Vishwamitra and then abandoned him ruthlessly after her task was completed. However, in Kavita Kane's novel *Menaka's Choice*, which tells how Menaka matures as an independent woman who controls her own life as well as the lives of others by her well-defined choices and execution, a feminist reworking of Menaka's story unfolds. Menaka, who was born from Brahma's thinking, is the smartest, and the most exquisitely beautiful of the ten apsaras who entertain devas and gods in Amaravati, the capital of growth.

Kane exposes the horrible life that the apsaras are forced to live in heaven, where they are forbidden to have eternal love or a family. "In Heaven, everything was shared; you couldn't own anything in this realm of wealth." (Kane 2015) says, "You could have everything but own nothing." They are simply objecting to seduce, offer pleasure, and desert, according to Indra. Apsaras have no rights in their daily lives. However, contrary to Indra's predictions, Menaka falls in love with the Gandharva king Vishwvasu and becomes pregnant with him, making Indra even more jealous and enraged. Indra, enraged, chooses to punish Vasu on his own because he cannot risk Menaka. Menaka, on the other hand, is wise enough to realise that Devendra cannot punish or exile her. She breaches the principles of submissiveness in the face of exigency, assumes full responsibility for the marriage, and saves Vasu by disputing with Indra and overcoming him with her speaking skills. It is impossible for anyone, including Indra, to vanquish Menaka in a battle of words. She realises where her strength resides, and she uses charm and wit to neutralise her opponent. In contrast to the earthly idea of a woman's virginity,

Kane brilliantly depicts heaven, where heavenly rules are created to manage women's libido. When Menaka says, "My desires should not shame me – and I desired Vasu enough to marry him, to have him for myself," she reveals the feeling of humiliation that comes with a woman's open declaration of desire (Kane 2015).

Apsaras are regarded and defined in heaven according to their status as utilitarian objects. Menaka is aware of her objectification and the oppression she is subjected to, notably from Indra. When Indra's and the child's futures are threatened, she forcefully defends her fundamental right to be a mother. However, because apsaras do not have the freedom to parent a child, Indra forbids them from keeping the infant in paradise. The child will be placed in the care of some childless rulers or sages. Menaka is forced to choose between two blessings in her life after protracted disputes with Indra: she can either abandon the kid and live in paradise with her Gandharva, or she can have the child and leave Vasu and Indralok both at once. Menaka is torn between two options, each of which will result in the loss of a piece of herself. She is finally compelled to abandon the child. Kane depicts a ravished Menaka who has the bravery to criticise patriarchy's atrocities against women. She compares herself and other apsaras to worldly whores, whom Indra considers his prized belongings. When Indra takes it as an insult and declares that apsaras in heaven should "please and entertain," Menaka replies. And flirt and woo, and seduce! To allure and exploit men, that's it! You made me a woman that glorifies beautiful creation, yet so rudimentary. I am that beautiful, eternally young woman who believes she lives with the blessed in Heaven. You gave me all the weapons of love, sex, and desire but disarmed me of my capability of conscious choice and decision. Why? I can be a woman, but never a wife or a mother. Just a sexual slave. A whore. (Kane 2015)

The legendary narratives are frequently launched and they put on a normal footing on the devadasi tradition and subsequently prostitution in Indian society, Menaka's juxtaposition of a heavenly apsara with an earthly harlot is highly pertinent. In the "Prevention of Immoral Traffic Act-1987," the Indian government defines prostitution as "sexual exploitation or abuse of persons for commercial objectives" (Khan & Singh 1987). This is precisely what Indra is doing in his heaven, exploiting the sexuality and sensuality of apsaras for his gain.

Indra, as the champion of patriarchal rule in heaven, plots with the apsara Rambha to exact ultimate vengeance on the forceful woman Menaka. Vasu, she claims, was a molester who attempted to rape her. They carried out the plan without Menaka, who might have defended Vasu at any cost. Indra converts Vasu into a "headless torso monster Kambandh" and banishes him to Earth, ignoring all of his petitions (Kane 2015). Menaka is devastated since she has lost both her child and her spouse. Menaka, on the other hand, avoids an emotional breakdown because she knows she will have to exact revenge when the time comes. Menaka uses the same plot that Indra employed against Vasu when the time comes. She portrays Tuburu, Rambha's lover, as a rapist who had previously attempted to molest her but couldn't since he was her instructor. Menaka is supported by Tilotama, her closest friend. Menaka agrees with Tumburu and asks for forgiveness when he dismisses the accusations and labels the two apsaras as liars. Menaka was attempting to demonstrate that, like Tumburu, Vasu was deceitfully blamed and duped by Rambha. Indra was at a loss for words to explain what he had done. Menaka once again wins the trial because of her wit and intelligence.

The second stage of Menaka's existence begins when she is tasked with disturbing the great rishi Vishwamitra's meditation while he is undergoing intense Tapasya to become a Brahmarishi. Indra knows that only Menaka, who is a peerless combination of beauty and brain, could control the combustible Vishwamitra. Menaka is given the task of seducing Vishwamitra, bearing him a child, and returning to Devalok, thereby trapping the sage in family life. After what he has done to Menaka, Indra has given up hope that she would obey him. To Indra's astonishment, she takes the job because she sees it as a chance to get away from heaven's clutches. She spells forth her strategy. Menaka travels to Vishwamitra in the wilderness and claims to be a victim of Indra's betrayal. She later seduces him with the help of Kama and moves into Vishwamitra's ashram. As time passes, she learns that the sage adores her to the point where he has never loved anybody else in his life.

Menaka is initially adamant about not being bound by her connection with Vishwamitra. Her mission is to kill him, but she gradually falls in love with him. Menaka completely forgets about her mission and, on the contrary, motivates him to complete his tapasya. She does not want to be the cause of his humiliation. Menaka's desire to create a true family with Vishwamitra can be interpreted as a defiance of heaven's patriarchal order, which denies apsaras the ability to have a family. She resolves to act on her own needs and desires, despite the patriarchal heaven's disapproval. When Indra tries to persuade Menaka to return to heaven, she gives him two options: he may either take her to heaven and face Vishwamitra's wrath, or he can let Menaka continue her life with the sage and prevent him from becoming a Brahmarishi. Indra has no choice but to allow her to continue their relationship with Vishwamitra.

Menaka gives birth to Vishwamitra's daughter, Shakuntala, as a symbol of her victory against Indra, who kidnapped her first child. Vishwamitra, on the other hand, forgets his sage duties and becomes a true family man after establishing a happy family. In the face of a happy family, his ambition to become a Brahmarishi appears trivial. Even Menaka's attempts fail to sway him. Menaka knows that she is becoming the greatest impediment to his becoming a Brahmarishi, that she is finally ruining the man she loves. Menaka's character is elevated by Kane because she is not a self-centered lady who is solely concerned with her happiness. Menaka decides to leave everything behind after achieving everything she ever desired in life, including a happy family. She decides to tell the truth. Menaka's moral uprightness appears to be greater than the devas who ordered her to kill the man. She pays attention to her inner voice.

Menaka tells Vishwamitra the truth with the hope that he will despise her for lying to him and return to his

quest to become a Brahmarishi. When Vishwamitra learns that Menaka has played a role in Indra's scheme to end his penance, he is distraught and enraged. Menaka is adamant about facing his fury and leaving him for his good, "She had to leave him to set him free. She was the shackle fettering him from his path of high honour, but no longer" (Kane 2015).

Menaka deftly manipulates the situation such that Vishwamitra's rage is channelled into his ambition, and he eventually becomes a Brahmarishi. When Vishwamitra decides to curse Indra, Menaka intervenes to prevent him from wasting his spiritual abilities, which is just what Indra requires. Menaka is afraid that Vishwamitra may curse her, so she curses her not to appear in front of him again. Menaka agrees with Vishwamitra's decision to give Shakuntala to Kanva, who is childless and capable of providing for her. Menaka and Vishwamitra decide to separate ways, keeping their tremendous love within them. Menaka, portrayed by Kavita Kane, is not the sensual seductress of legend who seduces men with her beauty, but a morally strong woman who sacrifices her happiness for the sake of her man's better future. She may have diverted his attention and enticed him, but it is the same woman who convinces him to realise his lifelong ambition.

In *Menaka's Choice*, Kavita Kane reframes patriarchy's incorrect conception of women, particularly the apsaras, as men's destroyers. Kane's heroine is a woman who urges her husband to follow the proper route that will lead to greater success. Menaka is portrayed by Kane as a responsible individual who is fully aware of the consequences of her actions. Cris Stephen the reviewer notes, "The book's title, *Menaka's Choice*, is a paradox. Menaka had a choice, or was it a struggle against the life she was destined to live? She turns her existence into a series of choices, winning some and losing the rest. She has no regrets, however" (Cris 2016).

9. CONCLUSION

The readers are surprised on a different level by Kane's sight inside Indra's realm. The celestial norms and principles that bind the heavenly inhabitants are skillfully framed by Kane as a mirror reflection of human laws. Women on earth and in heaven are both denied the right to express their aspirations. The apsaras are little more than gods' toys who have no rights of their own.

We are but . . . apsara, designed to please all but ourselves, Menaka remarks, exaggerating the situation. And we live in such a paradise. (Kane 2015)

The rejection of basic rights to one's own needs reveals the hierarchical patriarchal structure in which women are compelled to live, both on earth and in heaven. Kane's parallel divine universe highlights the flaws in man-made mythology, which is ultimately patriarchal and misogynistic.

10. SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Kavita Kane is an excellent feminist read. It can also be considered undermythological fiction, women's marginalization, and many other genres

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