



Research Paper

Giving Voice To The Voiceless: A Clash Of Dominant And Divergent Idea In *Sita's Sister* And *Menaka's Choice* By Kavitha Kane

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ABSTRACT: Literature always have the provision for taking different themes and subjects which tend to establish certain ideologies. Such ideologies sometimes establish a deep connection with the everyday rendering of society with an ability to influence them. In modern times such ideologies make a connection with both similar and contradictory concepts which are prevalent in the society and draw divergent ideas out of both similarities and differences. Indian literature also has that provision which derive themes and idea from both the modern and ancient periods. Sometimes they render a re-reading of ancient myths and tales and present them in modern context. Through this, they put forth a particular ideology which contradict the dominant ideology and create divergent ideology from them.

My paper aims to study such a rereading in Indian English literature through the examination of the novels *Sita's Sister* and *Menaka's Choice* by Kavitha Kane, which are published in the years 2014 and 2015 respectively. The novels portray the women characters who 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 patriarchal society where ideas were determined by men, which emerged as dominant, as seen in ancient scriptures like Ramayana and Mahabharatha. The female characters who stood at the bottom level didn't get opportunities to voice up their opinions and succumbed to the male voice.

My paper attempts to examine how Urmila and Menaka, the protagonists of the two novels raise their voice 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 counter parts. Urmila is the wife of Prince Lakshmana whereas Menaka is the apsara in Indralok. In these works, a clash occurs between a dominant idea and ideas diverging from the same dominant idea and questions the former dominant idea.

KEY WORDS: Re-reading of ancient tales, Dominant and Divergent Ideas, Voice from Below

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the modern period, literature has undergone various transformations, which can be witnessed by comparing literary works from time immemorial. The periods which contribute its own respective works make its contributions to the society by dealing the everyday lives of people and other complex social issues. Themes and subjects of literary work influence the society to such an extent. This feature of literature makes it a unique field where the authors can express their own feelings and opinions about everything whether it is in English literature, Indian English literature, African or Australian literature.

People could read and interpret the literary works according to their intentions and create their own perspective irrespective of what the author tries to put forth. As a result, 'The Death of the Author', a concept propounded by 'Roland Barthes' takes position, i.e. the author dies and reader originates. The reading and rereading of works and its various interpretations tend to establish certain ideas and ideologies in society.

The ideologies which get established through various themes, characters, and incidents in the literary works possess a deep connection with the everyday rendering of people. In modern times, these ideologies sometimes bear resemblance to each other and sometimes serve as contradictions. Some of them achieve

dominance and others tend to diverge from the dominant and a clash occurs between the dominant and the divergent ideas. Literary works often present this conflict between the dominant and the divergent ideas.

Indian English literature also leads to the establishment of certain dominant and divergent ideologies. It sometimes derives themes and characters from the scriptures and presents a rereading of ancient tales and myths which possess connection with the current period. Through this, the same conflict between dominant and divergent ideas take place.

My paper aims to examine such a rereading of characters and events taken from scriptures like Ramayana and Mahabharata in the novels "*Sita's Sister*" and "*Menaka's Choice*" by 'Kavitha Kane' published in the years 2014 and 2015 respectively. Both the novels present a rereading of characters and the novels are titled after the name of its protagonists. *Sita's Sister* presents Urmila, the younger sister of Sita and the wife of Lakshmana, while *Menaka's Choice* deals with the life of Menaka, the celestial nymph of Indraloka.

When we speak about the Hindu epics, certain characters are presented in high esteem. For instance, Lord Ram is referred to as the 'Perfect Man' or 'Maryada Purushothama'. While he is the epitome of all good qualities, Devi Sita becomes the epitome of a woman possessing the qualities which are expected from a traditional Indian wife. There are other male and female characters in the text who perform their respective duties as prescribed by society to both men and women.

Urmila is an overlooked character in Ramayana. But Kavitha Kane presents her as a mighty powerful lady who questions the entire system. She does not seek acknowledgement for her acts from other characters. The entire novel is narrated from the perspective of Urmila. The four princesses of Mithila were well-versed in the Vedas and Upanishads, Politics, music, art and literature (*Sita's Sister*,9). They are Sita, Urmila, Mandavi and Kirti. But Urmila acquired a different specific perspective about herself and the world. Her attitude regarding marriage is also different. "It was just a social discipline she would have to conform to" (*Sita's Sister*,12). She loved her sisters very much and indeed is a pillar of strength for them. Even after the marriage of four sisters with the four princesses, Urmila keeps her vitality and always try to keep the relationship between her sisters and their husbands in a way only she could achieve.

Lakshman defines Urmila as his enchantress or Mila "one where the hearts meet" (*Sita's Sister* 145). She shows her sensible attitude while opposing the crooked behaviour of Mantara, the maid of Queen Kaikeyi. When Sita and Lakshman decided to accompany Ram for his fourteen year exile in the forest, Urmila feels rejected by her husband and sister, the most important people in her life. But she realizes that she has to harden her heart. "Make it easier for me Mila. You are my strength but also my weakness" (*Sita's Sister*,145). Urmila pretends to scorn Lakshman and make it easier for him to bid farewell to her. In the same way, she convinces Sita also. "These fourteen years are going to be a test for each one of us. The pain and suffering is inevitable, but it will be valuable. It teaches us a lot in many ways" (*Sita's Sister*,153). At the end, she gives a farewell to her husband which is suitable to a warrior princess. "Come back, dear warrior, as you would from a war" (*Sita's Sister*, 158)

Urmila furiously questions the dharma of a husband to his wife and that of a son to his mother when Bharat decides to serve Nandigram for fourteen years as a hermit to attain penance. Even Guru Kashyap fails to silence her. She argues that when Queen Kaikeyi asked for boons no one stopped her and when Sita decided to accompany her husband everyone was happy as she was doing her duties of a perfect wife. "You may be the best of princes, the perfect sons, the ideal brothers, but never the good husbands. You are right, Guru Kashyap, Ayodhya is not Mitila. Mitila does not treat women shabbily" (*Sita's Sister*, 223). When Sita was abducted by Ravan, she again questions Ram for not supporting his wife as Sita had to walk into fire to prove her chastity. All these incidents show a completely different Urmila as opposed to the passively present Urmila portrayed in *Ramayana*.

While a princess turns out to be the main character in *Sita's Sister*, *Menaka's Choice* presents a celestial nymph in the lead role. The *apsaras* or the ethereal beings are often sent by *devasto* to disrupt the growing powers of *asuras* and the saints on earth. In Hindu mythology, Menaka's story is presented as a short one, which describes her seduction of Vishwamitra, the sage who aspires to become the *Brahmarshi*, in order to defeat another great rishi *Vasisht*. Her duty is to obstruct the *Tapassu* of Vishwamitra through her seduction and she has to return to Indraloka after the completion of her duty.

Kavita Kane gives a different perspective to Menaka's story by giving voice to Menaka and allows her to express her own opinions and thereby achieving the rights to make choices in her life, as opposed to Menaka presented in mythology. The work is indeed an account of Menaka, which starts from her birth itself.

"She rose diaphanously from the Ocean of Milk" (*Menaka's Choice*, 1). The novel begins by giving a majestic welcome to the birth of a celestial nymph, who possesses the ability to ravish and destroy. Menaka scorns the foolishness of male gender when she recollects how Mohini, the enchantress form of Lord Vishnu, intervenes on behalf of *devas* to attain immortality. It shows Menaka's sense of pride in Mohini's achievement as a woman and her ability to beat the supposedly unbeatable *Devas*. "But she was Menaka, born of the mind,

the imagination, from the mind of Lord Brahma, the creator himself" (*Menaka's Choice*, 4). She is a nymph who is credited with high intelligence along with beauty.

Menaka falls in love with *Vishwavasu*, the Devagandharva. An apsara can only make love and leave. It's forbidden to her to fall in love and marry the person she loves. But Menaka did. But when she was about to face the ire of Lord Indra, she convinced him. "Fortunately I chose someone from our world as my mate, not a mortal, not a rishi, not a deva" (*Menaka's Choice*, 16). She marks her words into the mind of Indra possessed with jealous. When Vishwavasu or Vasu, as called by Menaka, reminds about her dropping of *Uranyu*, another Gandharva, she says she made her choice. "We always have choices-how we select them, make us" (*Menakas's Choice*, 19). Again she was forced to abandon her daughter she had with Vasu, she poits out the same choice she could have made, i.e. either to abandon her child or leave Vasu and Indraloka with the child.

Urvasi, another apsara, fell in love with King Pururav and was separated by Vasu under the order of Lord Indra. When she curses Vasu for it, along with the crime he committed to Menaka by separating her from her own blood, Menaka defends him strongly. "She was our child, Urvashi. Mine and Vasu's" (*Menaka's Choice*, 62). Menaka's guilt in abandoning her child shows her anguish at not making the right choice. When Vasu transformed into a *Kabandh*, or a one-eyed monster, she lost her love of life and made her to make Indra and Rambha to pay for what they have done to her. "They have to pay for this deceit" (*Menaka's Choice*, 73). She made Indra to provide a solution to Vase's return to Indraloka through her actions. She refused to dance in the court till his return. She also decided not to obey the royal orders or expectations from a heavenly courtesan.

Menaka's love for her daughter gets established when she gives her own years of life by taking advantage of her boon of infinite life, when *Pramadvara*, her daughterreached a dying stage. She convinces *Yama* to save her daughter's life. "Can I not give a bit of my living breath to my dying daughter?" (*Menaka's Choice*, 92). When Menaka saw her daughter opened her eyes, she realizes the value of life and the brutality of death. She feels the emotion of being a mother, even though for just one day.

Menaka is used by Indra to seduce Sage Vishwamitra, when he starts his meditation to please Gods and to attain the position of *Brahmarishi*. Indra fears that he would lose his heaven when the sage attains more power. Menaka's duty is to seduce him, destroy his powers and trap him in a domestic life by giving him a baby. She boldly questions Indra's order, which is not expected from an *apsara* like her. "You can't order me, remember? I don't perform for you any longer so why would I agree to your sleazy seduction games?" (*Menaka's Choice*, 103). Finally she agrees to go as herself without any lies and pretence, as she feels it would be interesting to erase the boredom which she now suffers. She even solves all the possible faults which would arouse from this seduction process with her exceptional intelligence.

Menakas' seduction of Vishwamitra is her attempt to get out of heaven. Though she won by making Indra pay for his sin committed to Vasu through her sheer perseverance, she never got a chance to escape from heaven, as she suffered enough without her love. She feels that her new duty would evade her boredom in heaven. But Menaka's seduction of Vishwamitra opens another chapter of her love and life. She seduces him and at the same time she fell in love with her.

Menaka's duty was to destroy the sage. But she loved him deeply and did not want to be the cause of his destruction. As a result, she always encouraged him to continue his meditation, as she didn't want to put him in the trap of domestic life as wished by Indra. This is because she loves him just like her Vasu. She called him *Kaushik*, the original name of the great sage when he was the king. "I have never loved a man as I love you" (*Menaka's Choice*, 133). She married him and got pregnant. She again used her intelligence to convince Indra to stay with the sage until she became pregnant. She convinced him that if Vishwamitra lose her, he would destroy Indra and his heaven and made him to allow her to stay on earth.

But the end, Menaka is forced to leave the sage for his own good. She feared that he would lose everything because of his infinite love for her. She does not want to destroy the man she loves deeply. The sage had given her bliss to love her own child- her daughter, Shakuntala, which Vasu failed to give her. All these made her to love him even more deeply.

Finally she reveals her truth to him, so that he could hate her for being lied to him and she hopes that he would return to his sage life like earlier. Vishwamitra realizes that Menaka has betrayed him and their love. She feels that she has to wound him with her cruel words to make him hate her. "I was fed up with you; I was fed up of staying here. What have you given me, Kaushik?" (*Menaka's Choice*, 195). Though she loves him deeply, she determines to go back for his own good. She accepts his decision to give their daughter to Rishi Kanva. At the end, both part ways while keeping the immense love they have each other, along with the memories of their bliss full life they led.

Menaka's return shocks Indra. He sees an apsara who is on the verge of collapse. Her life without Vishwamitra makes her fall into agony. She feels that both Vasu and Vishwamitra loved her, though she was heartless to them. But Menaka's love for her fellow beings is proved when she strongly defends Rambha, another nymph as she is brutally raped by Ravan, the asura King, though Rambha was the reason for loss of Vasu. When she hears about Rambha's duty to seduce Vishwamitra, she feels a pang of jealous and at the same

time, a fear of destruction which is to happen to Rambha. She is turned into a stone by Vishwamitra, when she tried to seduce him to break his meditation, as he was about to attain his goal of becoming the *Brahmarishi*.

Menaka's love for her blood is again proved, when she came to help her daughter Shakuntala in a deep crisis she fell. Shakuntala possesses the same presence of mind of her mother. "As I Said earlier, you are a braver person than I was" (*Menaka's Choice*, 256). Shakuntala believes that King Dushyant will come back to take her with him. She also decides to bring up the child without father, if he never returns. Menaka thinks that it would never be an easy task for Shakuntala. But Shakuntala questions her mother's credentials. Like mother, daughter also made a choice. Menaka is even proud of her daughter.

Menaka is adamant at not meeting Vishwamitra, though she longed for it. She loved Vasu happily but she loved Vishwamitra with guilt. Her separation with Vasu was accident, where as the other was the result of the choice she made. Her last chance to meet Vishwamitra is again destroyed by the same choice she made. Though she reunites with Vasu, she never forget Vishwamitra. She cherishes her love for him always.

Urmila and Menaka are characters who are placed in mythology in a marginalized position. The former is given the character of a passive wife while the latter is confined in the clutches of a mythical tale of seduction. Nothing more is heard about both the characters. But Kavitha Kane gives voice to these voiceless women. The patriarchal society establish their own ideology and norms. This is evident in many works of male writers. But diverging ideas take its form when female writers present their characters. This is evident in *Sita's Sister* and *Menaka's Choice*. Both Urmila and Menaka questions the dominant ideology. As a result, divergent ideas develop out of it.

The female characters in both the novels live with choice. They are entitled to obey the dominant ideology. They have choices in their lives. As a result, they diverge from the dominant patriarchal ideology.

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