

Subjugation and Resistance: A Feminist Reading of The Fisher Queen's Dynasty

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Abstract

Mythological narratives such as the Mahabharata have long functioned as cultural texts that transmit moral, ethical, and social values across generations. However, these narratives are deeply embedded within patriarchal frameworks that privilege male heroism and marginalize female voices. Women are frequently portrayed as passive figures—obedient daughters, devoted wives, or sacrificial mothers—whose identities are shaped by male authority. In this context, contemporary Indian English writers like Kavita Kane play a crucial role in revisiting and rewriting these narratives to foreground the voices of marginalized female characters. In *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, Kane reconstructs the character of Satyavati, traditionally viewed as ambitious and morally ambiguous, into a powerful and complex woman navigating systems of oppression. As Jerlin Flower S and N. Sowmia Kumar observe, “women are often denied the freedom to express themselves in a world dominated by men” (Flower and Kumar 1). Kane's narrative challenges this silencing by granting Satyavati a voice that articulates both her suffering and her aspirations. The novel functions not merely as a retelling but as a revisionist intervention that questions dominant patriarchal ideologies. It highlights the processes through which women are “oppressed, marginalized, and subjugated” while also demonstrating their capacity for resistance and transformation (Flower and Kumar 1). Through a feminist lens, Satyavati's life becomes a site of negotiation between subjugation and resistance. Kavita Kane's *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* presents Satyavati as a multifaceted feminist figure whose life embodies both systemic subjugation and strategic resistance; through her assertion of sexual autonomy, political ambition, and social agency, she challenges patriarchal norms while simultaneously exposing the complexities and contradictions of power within oppressive structures.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Subjugation, Resistance, Feminism, Identity, Satyavati.

INTRODUCTION

The Mahabharata reflects a social order structured by patriarchy, where women are systematically subordinated. They are denied autonomy and reduced to secondary status, reinforcing their identity as the “other.” As the source text emphasizes, gender discrimination is deeply entrenched, and women are viewed as inferior beings within a male-dominated society. Satyavati's life exemplifies this systemic marginalization from birth. Despite her royal lineage, she is abandoned while her male counterpart is accepted. This reflects a broader societal attitude in which daughters are devalued. As Altekari notes, “the birth of a girl was generally an unwelcome event in ancient times in all patriarchal societies” (Altekari 3). This rejection not only deprives Satyavati of privilege but also instils in her a profound awareness of social injustice. Furthermore, the narrative highlights how patriarchy intersects with class oppression. Satyavati's mother, a fisherwoman, is exploited and discarded, revealing how lower-class women are doubly marginalized. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that “she is nothing other than what man decides” (Beauvoir 25) encapsulates this condition. Women are reduced to objects whose identities are constructed through male desire and authority..

While patriarchy imposes subjugation, it also produces resistance. Satyavati's early experiences of deprivation and exclusion shape her consciousness and fuel her ambition. Her resentment towards social inequality is evident when she reflects on her condition: "She detested the way the nobles and royalty lived their lives... with no hope of ever bridging the gap" (Kane 10). This awareness of inequality becomes the foundation of her resistance. Unlike passive female characters who accept their fate, Satyavati refuses to internalize her marginalization. Instead, she transforms her anger into determination, seeking to transcend her social position. Her journey thus illustrates a key feminist insight: oppression does not merely silence women but can also generate the desire for empowerment. Satyavati's ambition is not a flaw but a response to systemic injustice.

One of the most radical aspects of Kane's portrayal of Satyavati is her assertion of sexual autonomy. In patriarchal societies, women's sexuality is tightly controlled, and moral codes are imposed to regulate their behaviour. However, Satyavati challenges these norms by reclaiming control over her body and desires. In her encounter with Parashar, Satyavati refuses to be a passive victim. She negotiates the terms of their relationship, demanding "uncompromised virginity, perpetual youth, and a fragrant body". This negotiation transforms the encounter into an act of agency rather than exploitation. Moreover, her statement—"If men can use women, why can't women get something from men?" (Kane 32)—directly challenges patriarchal double standards. By viewing beauty and desire as tools, she rejects the notion that female sexuality must be passive or submissive. This perspective aligns with feminist critiques of moral codes that regulate women's bodies. Satyavati's refusal to accept these codes represents a significant act of resistance.

Marriage, within patriarchal systems, often functions as a mechanism of control over women. However, Satyavati redefines marriage as a site of negotiation and empowerment. Her refusal to join King Shantanu's harem and her insistence on becoming his queen demonstrate her determination to secure power and legitimacy. This strategic approach to marriage reflects her understanding of social structures. She recognizes that power within a patriarchal system must often be negotiated rather than directly challenged. Her actions thus represent a form of pragmatic feminism, where resistance is achieved through strategic engagement with existing structures. Satyavati's transformation into the queen of Hastinapur marks her entry into the public and political sphere. Traditionally, women are excluded from such spaces, which are dominated by male authority. However, Satyavati actively participates in governance, diplomacy, and decision-making. Her concern for her community further underscores her political consciousness. She advocates for the welfare of the fisherfolk, raising her voice against injustice. This demonstrates that her ambitions extend beyond personal gain to encompass collective empowerment. Her presence in the political sphere challenges the patriarchal notion that women are incapable of leadership. She emerges as a figure of authority who shapes the course of the dynasty.

Despite her resistance, Satyavati's actions reveal the ethical complexities of power. Her decision to compel Bhishma to abduct the Kashi princesses illustrates her willingness to adopt patriarchal methods: "By marrying all three of them into Hastinapur, Kashi will be solely ours" (Kane 213). Similarly, her use of *niyog* reflects both empowerment and coercion. Her declaration—"They will have to obey me for the sake of the crown" (Kane 282)—highlights her authoritative approach. These actions raise critical questions about the nature of resistance. Can liberation be achieved within oppressive systems without reproducing their structures? Satyavati's character embodies this tension, illustrating that resistance is often complex and morally ambiguous. A key feminist intervention in the novel is the redefinition of lineage. Patriarchal systems emphasize male lineage, but Satyavati challenges this by asserting the central role of women in creation. As the text states, "it is the women who give birth and create new life... though men claim it to be theirs" (Kane 284). This perspective reclaims female reproductive power and challenges patriarchal assumptions. Through *niyog*, Satyavati ensures the continuation of the dynasty while redefining the concept of lineage itself.

Satyavati's struggle is not limited to gender oppression but extends to issues of class and caste. Her lower-class origins subject her to discrimination, while characters like Vidura are excluded due to caste. Her assertion—"If I, a fisher girl, could be queen, I shall see to it that a maid's son gets his rights!" (Kane 314)—reflects her commitment to social justice. This intersectional perspective broadens the feminist scope of the novel, highlighting the interconnected nature of oppression. Satyavati's life is a narrative of transformation. From Kali to Satyavati, from Matsyagandha to Yojanagandha, her journey symbolizes the evolution of female identity. As the text notes, her life is "a tale of metamorphosis: from a fisher girl to a queen" (Flower and Kumar 4). This transformation represents the possibility of self-determination and empowerment. Her movement from private to public space signifies a broader feminist shift, where women claim visibility and authority in traditionally male-dominated domains.

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Kavita Kane's *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, offers a compelling feminist reinterpretation of mythological history. Through Satyavati's journey, the novel exposes the structures of patriarchy while celebrating the resilience and agency of women. Satyavati emerges as both a victim and a resistor—shaped by oppression yet determined to overcome it. Her story illustrates that resistance is not a singular act but an ongoing process of negotiation, assertion, and transformation. Ultimately, the novel redefines female identity, demonstrating that women are not passive participants in history but active agents capable of shaping their own destinies..

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