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Reimagining the Mahabharata: Agency, Ambition, and Tragedy in the Lives of Satyavati and Amba

Taanya *
Research Scholar
Department of English
Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak,
Haryana, India.

Abstract

The Mahabharata, a cornerstone of Indian epic tradition traditionally centred on male heroes, is increasingly being reimagined by contemporary authors who spotlight its marginalised female figures. This paper examines two such feminist retellings: Kavita Kané's portrayal of Satyavati in The Fisher Queen's Dynasty and Laksmi Pamuntjak's exploration of Amba in The Question of Red. Kané presents Satyavati as a figure of proactive, strategic agency, driven by ambition born from injustice to seize power and secure her lineage, actively manipulating circumstances and individuals like Bhishma. Conversely, Pamuntjak utilises Amba's mythic tragedy, rooted in thwarted love and culminating in a consuming quest for revenge, as an archetype resonating through modern Indonesian history, framing her agency as reactive yet enduringly potent, defined largely by her traumatic relationship with Bhishma. The analysis contrasts Satyavati's calculated path to power with Amba's trajectory fueled by love, loss, and vengeance. It further explores the pivotal but distinct role of Bhishma in each narrative—an obstacle and tool for Satyavati, the source of defining love and trauma for Amba. Kané's straightforward dive into the psyche paired with Pamuntjak's richly history-soaked style shows us that modern literature isn't simply retelling epic tales—it's twisting them in unexpected ways, frequently flipping tired patriarchal scripts and, in many cases, offering a fresh, if sometimes messy, look at female drive, ambition, and the subtle strains of tragedy woven throughout the Mahabharata's intricate world. These reimaginings affirm the epic's enduring relevance and the vital necessity of reclaiming overlooked female perspectives.

Keywords: Retellings, strategic agency, quest, vengeance, patriarchy, female perspectives.

The Mahabharata stands at the heart of Indian epic tradition, overflowing with a wild mix of stories, characters, and ethical puzzles—even though its narrative used to center almost exclusively on male heroes and their clashes. Lately, in my view, modern writers have started to turn the spotlight onto those long-overlooked female figures, giving fresh breath to their stories, their inner drives, and the subtle ways they assert agency, which really adds a surprising

* Corresponding Author: Taanya
Email: taanyagoyal1310@gmail.com
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new depth to the classic tale. Kavita Kané's work, for example, throws us right into a world where ambition takes center stage—Satyavati isn't hesitating to rewrite her fate even if it means sacrificing others along the way—while Laksmi Pamuntjak's narrative in The Question of Red unfolds around Amba, a figure whose tragic curve is woven into modern Indonesian history in a way that feels almost mythic. I've always been struck by how both authors explore the rippling impact of a woman's choices (think of how Bhishma's life quietly comes under their influence), yet they do it in ways that couldn't be more different. Generally speaking, Kané's Satyavati comes off as a masterclass in deliberate, sometimes cold, ambition—she's practically married to the idea of control and strategic sacrifice. On the flip side, Pamuntjak's Amba—initially propelled by a tender love that sadly morphs into a relentless chase for justice—carries a sorrowful resonance that feels both historic and deeply personal. It's interesting, really, how these portrayals, though steeped in the same rich tradition, lead us down paths of calculated agency versus heart-torn revenge, leaving a lingering thought that such contrasts make the epic narrative all the more vivid—even if the details sometimes blur together in a way only life can. We can appreciate the nuanced ways modern authors reclaim and reimagine these powerful female figures by examining these portrayals, focusing on their motivations, struggles, agency, and pivotal relationship with Bhishma/Devavrat.

Kané and Pamuntjak set out to let those usually sidelined voices speak up. Take Satyavati, for instance—a fisher-girl turned queen-mother—who often ends up being little more than an excuse to spark Bhishma's vow, with her dreams reduced, in most cases, to a mere plot tool. Then there's Amba. Although her fate is key to Bhishma's downfall, her story mostly zeroes in on her victim status and her thirst for revenge, sidelining the rich layers of her inner world. It is compelling that Kané, by naming her work The Fisher Queen's Dynasty, seems to insist on putting Satyavati right at the center of the Kuru family saga. The narrative, quite naturally, digs into her origins, her many humiliations, and the fierce determination that grew from all those experiences. Early on, her father Dasharaj recognises her potential and his role in her future, promising himself he would make right the injustice of her abandonment by King Uparichar Vasu: "And one day, the queen that you deserve to be" (Kané, p. 12). This establishes Satyavati not just as a passive recipient of fate but as someone deserving, someone whose potential queenhood is foreseen and, implicitly, achievable through will. Her encounter with Rishi Parashar becomes a pivotal moment of self-actualization, where she leverages desire – both his and her burgeoning understanding of its power – to gain boons, transforming herself from the slighted 'Kali' or 'Matsyagandha' (the fish-smelling one) into the fragrant, powerful

'Yojanagandha'. Parashar recognises her unique nature: “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!’" (Kané, p. 26). This exchange underscores Kané's project: to depict Satyavati’s awareness of her potential and her conscious decision to pursue it.

Pamuntjak, conversely, uses Amba’s story as a foundational myth that echoes through the turbulent history of 20th-century Indonesia, particularly the 1965 anti-Communist purges. The novel's prologue, reflecting Mahabharata's Amba, immediately establishes her complexity beyond simple victimhood: "And yet this is not what happens. The name Amba, far from being heroic, still reminds folks of the worst of all fallen women, a woman twice spurned, a woman discarded by not one, but two noble men, and one whose legacy is not defined by her brains or by her skills or by the quality of her heart, but by her burning desire for revenge" (Pamuntjak, p. 19). Pamuntjak acknowledges the traditional interpretation but frames it as incomplete, hinting at the possibility of reclaiming Amba’s narrative: "Yet every so often people choose a culturally unpopular name for their offspring... Sometimes it simply feels right, because no other name will do. For is it not true that all stories exist to be written anew?" (Pamuntjak, p. 19). Modern characters in the text wrestle with Amba’s legacy against a backdrop full of history. I feel the mythic Amba herself shows up as a strange, almost eerie force—her tale of love, betrayal, and raw revenge ends up sketching a recurring map of violence and those lingering wounds that just don’t seem to heal. Her agency, therefore, is presented less through direct action in the mythological past (within this text) and more through her enduring, problematic legacy and the modern Amba's quest to understand it.

The primary motivations driving these two women starkly differ, highlighting their distinct characteristics. Satyavati in Kané’s story burns with an almost unbridled drive to break free from where she started and seize the power she’s always felt was hers by right. It’s hard not to notice that after her royal father, King Vasu, essentially bailed on her and relegated her to a so-called “commoner” life, she ends up stirring a raw, lingering resentment and a stubborn wish to claw back the status she believes she deserves. She tells her foster father, Dasharaj, "‘I—not Fate or God—shall be responsible for my own happiness, my own future. I promise myself, I will not be the victim anymore...’" (Kané, p. 38). You can really see her knack for strategy in how she deals with people; she doesn’t just grab boons from Parashar for a bit of fun but uses them as a boost to her own power. And honestly, when she lays out her terms for marrying Shantanu—passed along by Dasharaj—it’s all very political, clearly aimed at securing the throne for her future progenuy. Her ambition is explicitly stated: “I was born a princess and I

shall be queen some day!'" (Kané, p. 35). Love, for Kané's Satyavati, is secondary, perhaps even a tool; as she reflects after her encounter with Parashar: "Beauty and lust is just that—a means to an end" (Kané, p. 38).

Amba's motivations, as filtered through Pamuntjak's narrative framework and the mythological background, stem initially from love and desire, tragically thwarted, which then fester into an all-consuming quest for revenge. The Mahabharata tells of her choosing Bhishma's captive state over her betrothal to Shalva, only to be rejected by both. Pamuntjak's prologue in The Question of Red emphasises this later phase: "...her burning desire for revenge. And there is nothing more shameful than a woman who does not gracefully accept her fate, justified or otherwise" (Pamuntjak, p. 19). While the provided OCR doesn't detail Amba's internal state during her mythological interactions, the modern Amba's journey in The Question of Red is framed by the search for the lost lover, Bhisma, suggesting that love, loss, and the ensuing trauma are central to her archetype's motivation. Her agency becomes inextricably linked to reclaiming her narrative from the status of a spurned woman, a quest that, in the original myth, leads to self-immolation and rebirth for the sole purpose of vengeance.

Both women exercise agency, but their methods and the nature of their power differ significantly. Satyavati's agency is proactive, strategic, and often ruthless. She uses seduction and negotiation to achieve her aims. With Parashar, she turns his desire into an opportunity, demanding boons: "'Then . . . make me fragrant,' she said... 'You will remain a virgin... He will remain with me... We could be spotted from here... Anything else?' (Kané, pp. 24-26). Her most significant act of agency is orchestrating Bhishma's terrible vow. She doesn't yield to Shantanu's love until her father secures the promise that her sons will inherit the throne, effectively disinheriting Devavrat. Dasharaj articulates the condition: "Either my daughter marries the young crown prince... Or she can only marry you if you promise that her children will be the heirs... So, which option do you agree to?'" (Kané, p. 78). When Bhishma removes himself as an obstacle, Satyavati further secures her lineage by forcing the issue of niyog upon his death, demonstrating her relentless pursuit of dynastic power: "'Take back your throne, marry and have heirs!' she said quickly... '[Niyog is] duty!... I can; I am the queen. They will have to obey me for the sake of the crown.'" (Kané, pp. 268, 278). Satyavati actively manipulates situations and people to secure her position and legacy.

Within the confines of the provided Pamuntjak text and the mythological context, Amba's agency appears more reactive initially, shaped by abduction and rejection. However, her refusal to accept her fate passively transforms into a powerful, albeit destructive, agency fueled by vengeance. In the myth, she seeks aid from various kings and gods to defeat Bhishma. Pamuntjak's modern Amba Kinanti Eilers demonstrates agency through her determined search for Bhisma's story on Buru Island, defying convention and danger. The mythological Amba's ultimate act of agency is her self-immolation, a radical choice to end one life and be reborn with the sole purpose of destroying Bhishma. Pamuntjak's writing zooms in on the lingering fallout and subtle echoes of Amba's tale. Instead of getting wrapped up in polished political moves like Satyavati does, this archetype bursts out as a raw, tragic kind of power—one born from deep, searing wounds and a stubborn urge to redress old wrongs. This drive seems to spill over lifetimes.

The relationship with Bhishma/Devavrat is the linchpin connecting these two narratives, and it is here that the impact of both women is most profoundly felt, albeit through vastly different dynamics. For Satyavati, Bhishma (as Devavrat) is initially the primary obstacle to her ambition. His existence as Shantanu's heir necessitates her demand for his disinheritance. Her ambition is fulfilled through his sacrifice. The scene where Devavrat takes the oath is central to Kané's narrative: "'I vow to you, sir, I shall never marry, and, henceforth, shall dedicate my life to celibacy and unbroken chastity... I shall remain without a wife and child till my last breath. That is my promise to you!'" (Kané, pp. 95-96). This oath, extracted under pressure orchestrated by Satyavati and Dasharaj, defines Bhishma's entire existence. Satyavati later relies on his adherence to this vow and his loyalty to the throne she controls. She uses him as a regent, as mentor to her sons, and even tries (and fails) to command him to break his vow for the sake of the dynasty through niyog. Her relationship with him is predicated on his sacrifice for her dynasty. Bhishma himself, on his bed of arrows, reflects on this, inextricably linking his wasted life and regrets to Satyavati: "what he and Satyavati had irrevocably done... He had destroyed them all, for her-for that one woman... Satyavati" (Kané, pp. 9, 10).

For Pamuntjak's Amba, Bhishma is the object of a profound, life-altering love, followed by devastating rejection and an equally profound desire for retribution. Theirs is a tragic connection, a story of "what might have been" distorted by duty (Bhishma's vow) and circumstance (the abduction). The Prologue of The Question of Red sets this tone: "As Amba was shuttled back and forth, eventually abandoned, alone, her heart turned to stone... In the next life Amba returned as Srikandi... It was also foretold that she would be the one to bring

down the indomitable Bhisma" (Pamuntjak, p. 18). The modern narrative thread in Pamuntjak's novel revolves around Amba Kinanti Eilers' search for the truth about her Bhisma Rashad, suggesting that this connection, fraught with love, loss, and historical violence, continues to haunt the present. Bhishma's significance to Amba is not as an obstacle or a tool (as he is for Satyavati), but as the defining relationship of her life, the source of both her greatest joy and her deepest trauma, ultimately leading her (in the myth) to become the instrument of his destruction.

Finally, the narrative contexts shape these portrayals. Kané dives straight into the mind, blending old myths with a raw look at human ambition. She unpacks Satyavati's past and the sparks behind her drive—a pursuit that, in many cases, reveals both tender hopes and a harsh fallout. The story unfolds in a direct way, tracking her climb and the ripple effects of each decision, sometimes punctuated by unexpected twists. Pamuntjak employs a far more complex structure, layering myth, Indonesian history, and a contemporary quest. Amba and Bhisma function as powerful archetypes whose tragedy resonates with the historical trauma of 1965 Indonesia. The fragmentation of the narrative, the focus on memory, loss, and the unreliability of history itself reflects the difficulty of reclaiming stories buried by violence and political silence. Pamuntjak's Amba is less a historical figure remade and more a timeless symbol whose story is "written anew" (Pamuntjak, p. 19) through the experiences of modern characters grappling with her legacy.

In conclusion, Kavita Kané's Satyavati and Laksmi Pamuntjak's Amba represent compelling contemporary reimaginings of pivotal female figures from the Mahabharata. Kané presents Satyavati as a pragmatic, fiercely ambitious woman who uses her intelligence and circumstances to rise from obscurity to immense power, directly shaping the Kuru dynasty's fate through demands that necessitate Bhishma's lifelong sacrifice. Her agency is political, strategic, and self-serving, though born of initial injustice. Pamuntjak's Amba, conversely, is framed as a figure of tragic destiny, whose agency is born first of love and then of its violent negation, leading to an enduring legacy of unresolved trauma and a quest for revenge that transcends lifetimes, deeply intertwined with Bhishma not as a means to an end, but as the central figure in her personal tragedy. Both authors successfully reclaim these women's narratives, offering nuanced explorations of their motivations and struggles. Yet, through Satyavati's calculated rise and Amba's consuming tragedy, they illuminate different facets of female agency, power, love, and the devastating, far-reaching consequences of choices made at the complex intersection of personal desire, societal expectation, and dynastic duty within

the epic landscape of the Mahabharata. They remind us that even within ancient tales, there are always stories waiting to be told anew, especially those of the women whose lives shaped the destinies of heroes and kingdoms.

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