

**Margins and Beyond: Satyavati's Feminist Journey towards
Empowerment in Sharath Kommaraju's 'The Winds of
Hastinapur.**

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Abstract

Mythological stories have always foregrounded masculine powers through their male-centred narratives. Against the background of such predominantly male –centric discourse, Sharath Kommaraju's novel *The Winds of Hastinapur* breaks this stereotype. It is interesting as well as significant that Kommaraju's work presents a feminine perspective. Revisionist mythmaking brings to fore women's perspectives to subvert patriarchal values.¹ They reassess and reconstruct the images of women in a contemporary light. Such reinterpretative mythmaking is exemplified in the journey of Satyavati by laying bare her mind and her private life. In the process, Satyavati emerges from the margins as a fiercely independent woman in pursuit of a life that she visualises, and breaks several stereotypes. This paper is an attempt to trace her life on feminist lines, as a free-willed, unafraid, sexually assertive woman choosing to live her life on her terms. Being in control of her life, she weaves a pattern of life that she wishes to and crafts her life her way. Satyavati embodies a truly empowered woman rising from being ignored and marginalised onto becoming the Queen of Hastinapur

Keywords: Satyavati, revisionist, mythmaking, feminine, feminist, patriarchy.

Introduction

Mythological stories have always foregrounded masculine powers through their male-centred narratives. Against the background of such predominantly male –centric discourse,

¹ Chandran, Anila. The Present Voice from the past: Revisionist Mythmaking in Pratibha Ray's, Yajnaseni in *The Criterion an International In English*, Vol.4, issue. II 2013. <<www.the – criterion.com>>

Sharath Kommaraju's novel *'The Winds of Hastinapur'* breaks this stereotype. It is interesting as well as significant that Kommaraju's work presents a feminine perspective. Revisionist mythmaking brings to fore women's perspectives to subvert patriarchal values. They reassess and reconstruct the images of women in a contemporary light. Such re-interpretative mythmaking is exemplified in the journey of Satyavati by laying bare her mind and her private life. In the process, Satyavati emerges from the margins as a fiercely independent woman in pursuit of a life that she visualises, and breaks several stereotypes. This paper is an attempt to trace her life on feminist lines, as a free-willed, unafraid, sexually assertive woman choosing to live her life on her terms. Being in control of her life, she weaves a pattern of life that she wishes to and crafts her life her way. Satyavati embodies a truly empowered woman rising from being ignored and marginalised onto becoming the Queen of Hastinapur

Satyavati is an important character in the *Mahabharata* who, with her decisions brings about certain important outcomes in the epic. Bhisma's vow of celibacy, the birth of Dhritarashtra, Pandu, and Vidura and her sons becoming kings of Hastinapur are very direct consequences of her decisions. However, with masculine themes such as war, heroism and the grand sweeping parade of great male characters, the women in the usual renderings of the epics have generally had peripheral existence. Though women such as Draupadi, Kunti and Gandhari do have an existence (however peripheral) against the backdrop of the Great War, yet the Gangas, Satyavatis and Ambas are near-unheard voices. "For the story of the Great War is also the story of women, of Ganga and Satyavati and all who came after ..."
(Kommaraju, Sharath 'The Winds of Hastinapur', 2013). Sharath Kommaraju, the author of *The Winds of Hastinapur* puts forth thus "I attempt to stay away from physical conflicts and focus on the emotional and the cerebral.... I write about women who are proud of their emotional makeup, their empathy, their sexuality, and their ability to give life..."² Satyavati is one such woman – proud of her emotional makeup and sexuality treading into male space and living her life.

The *Mahabharata* as a text says very little about Satyavati. Her legend is mentioned elaborately in later texts such as *Harivamsa* and the *Devi Bhagavata Purana*³. Satyavati is

² The Readdicts: Author Interview <www.theaddicts.blogspot.in>

³ Bhattacharya, Pradip. Five Holy Virgins, Five Sacred Myths

the daughter of a cursed *apsara* called Adrika who was turned into a fish and lived in the river Yamuna. Adrika swallows the semen of the Chedi King Uparichara Vasu and when cut open by the fisherman, two babies are found in the womb of Adrika the fish. The male child is kept by the king Uparichara and the female child is given to the fisher folk. The chief of the fisher folk adopts the girl who is named 'Matsya – gandha' (the one who smelt of fish) by the king due to the odour which came from the girl's body. The fisher folk chief named her 'kali' (the dark one) because of her complexion. Against the background of the myth of Satyavati's birth, one wonders if her determination to make her children kings arises from her resentment at being rejected by her royal father who accepts the male child and gives her away to the fisher folk.⁴

Sharath Komarraju, in the second part of *The Winds of Hastinapur* focuses on Kali (Satyavati) and her perspective. Her growth from being an ordinary fisher folk girl, ignored and teased for her awkward physical appearance and unbearable body stench to becoming a beautiful and much sought after woman with an irresistible body fragrance, who goes on to become the queen of the powerful kingdom of Hastinapur is an admirable one. On one hand is her determination to take control of her personal life completely and also help her entire community of fishermen with a good life by becoming the queen of Hastinapur; on the other hand is Satyavati, a single mother in search of her long lost first born (a son before wedlock) who she had to let go since she was not married then. Komarraju's Satyavati is bold, sexually assertive, free-spirited, and completely in control of her life at one level and beneath that strength and ambition is another Satyavati with her insecurities fears and dreams. Her journey is that of a woman who dares, who questions and who acts – all bearing strong undertones of a feminist's journey of strength, courage and liberation.

Marginalisation is an intrinsic issue in the life of Satyavati. Born of royalty and brought up by the fisher folk, she, like her folk, also ferries people across the Yamuna. The fisher people lived on the banks of the river Yamuna while the city of Hastinapur existed along the great river Ganga. "As far as the people of Hastina were concerned the Great River was Ganga. What occurred on the banks of the Yamuna was of no concern to them" (Komarraju, *The Winds of Hastinapur*, 2013: 155). It is interesting to note a double marginalisation of the river Yamuna and then the fisher people. It is clear that the fisher people existed on the margins of the great kingdom of Hastinapur just as the river Yamuna, of the Great River Ganga. Kali's

⁴ Devdutt Pattanaik, 'Jaya', An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata.

identity is very deeply intertwined with both the fisher people who raised her, where she belonged to and the river Yamuna which gave her solace, livelihood, and her joys. (She was the happiest drifting in her boat on the river Yamuna) In this identity Kali and the river Yamuna along with the community of fisher folk become the 'Other'-the ignored, voiceless and suppressed 'Other'.

The myth of her birth intrigues her. She is told by her father that she has a twin brother who now rules over a kingdom to the West by the Rocky Mountains which has a fish on its flag. He often tells her that she too is destined for bigger things like her brother (Komarraju, *The Winds of Hastinapur*, 2013:161). Kali is always conscious of her isolation, her marginalisation. Along with being isolated from the city of Hastinapur, Kali feels isolated within her own community of the fisher people. Her dark complexion, her coarse and cracked skin, her thin physical stature and most of all the stench of fish which never left her person earning her the name of 'Matsya gandha'. People and particularly the young men in her community never gave her a second look – hence she lives and suffers the pain of being lonely, teased and isolated. She ferries people across the Yamuna only to keep herself away from people. "She was overjoyed to be away from the settlement" (Komarraju, *The Winds of Hastinapur*, 2013: 163). She feels marginalised and isolated on all counts – her physical awkwardness, her dark complexion, her identity as a fisher girl and as a dweller on the banks of Yamuna on the outskirts of the city of Hastinapur – She is unseen, unheard, and undesired. A chance meeting with the sage Parashar, who she ferries across the Yamuna changes her life completely. She is completely in control of her life from thence. Throughout the episode with sage Parashar, Kali is her own firm self and takes the opportunity to change her life for the better. She comes across as a young girl who is clear about what she wants and gets what she wants or desires. Kali's maturity and her farsightedness are seen in the way she handles the episode with sage Parashar. Although a young girl of fourteen years, his presence, his lustful advances and his desires do not overawe her. In a clear, calm manner, Kali gets sage Parashar to teach her the secret knowledge of the aromatic musk which can give her body an intoxicating fragrance. In spite of never being desired for earlier, yet she does not give into the wishes of sage Parashar. She courageously tells him "Do not take me without my consent, Parashara. "The act of love ought to be pleasurable for both of us, and if you take me against my will, it will be pleasurable neither for me nor for you" (Komarraju, *The Winds of Hastinapur*, 2013: 175) She is also clear about herself when she raises questions regarding her

virginity and does not accede to his demands till he promises her that she will be as virginal as she was before the union (Komarraju, *The Winds of Hastinapur*, 2013: 178). Pradip Bhattacharya too admires this maturity and self control of Kali who allows her own feminine desires to stay forever young and forever fragrant be fulfilled by sage Parashar⁵.

After the physical union with Sage Parashar, her own thoughts on virginity are very clearly those of feminists. She realizes that she had asked the sage for only a physical embodiment of virginity –“ the one that men understood and worshipped, of what use was that layer of bubble-like skin between her legs it could not free her when it impeded her from knowing herself, from thinking for herself, from loving herself?” (Komarraju, *The Winds of Hastinapur* ,2013:185). Kali, after this, wooed young men of her community. She unapologetically sought them on her own terms and also became skilled in handling her reproductive cycle. She begins to experience a sense of liberty which she did not know before. Her desire for men did not shame her; she rather took pride in it. She began to participate in her father’s court, she took charge and the women and men respected her alike. She sought men for her bed as a desiring woman and not with the authority of being the Chief,s daughter .She realizes “that virginity was in being pure in thought and action, being unafraid as long as your actions have nothing immoral about them; and taking pride in the gifts Gods have given you and spit back on the shame that the world insisted on heaping upon you” (Komarraju, *The Winds of Hastinapur* ,2013:186) Her sexual assertiveness, her new perspective on sexual freedom without any baggage of guilt and her novel notions of virginity and freedom – these attributes clearly show feminist hues and place her as a second wave feminist.

The new found sense of freedom makes her unafraid. She, supported by an understanding father, decides to give birth to her child before wedlock. In spite of having a choice of aborting the baby, she chooses to give birth to him and gives him away to her aunt. Later in life she goes in search of him and also acknowledges him, Krishna Dwaipayana as her first born love-child. Armed with an intoxicating fragrance and an inner courage, driven by a sense of commitment to her clan, Kali designs her future as a queen of Hastinapur. Her personal ambitions are clearly linked to the welfare and of her community. The fisher people lived like the lowest of outcasts on the bank of the Yamuna, ignored and isolated by the people inland and if she could somehow persuade the king”.... (Komarraju, *The Winds of*

⁵ Bhattacharya, Pradip *Five Holy Virgins, Five Sacred Myths*

Hastinapur ,2013: 188). AS a result of her plans the king arrives at her doorstep. She very practically seizes the opportunity to strike a deal for herself and her community. She is fearless when she taunts the King Shantanu saying, “You have never come to us, you – and people of your kingdom pretend we do not exist.... Because we smell! You cast us off to the bank of the river and let us alone, only noticing us when we have to trade... You see us as necessary evils rather than one of your own kinds... (Kommarju, The Winds of Hastinapur, 2013: 193) Her voice is that of a subaltern, speaking, reminding the king of the injustice meted out to her people. She fearlessly presents the utter poverty of her people and demands that the fisher people be given the respect and recognition they deserve as a community rather than short lived benefits. She demands a better life for them through progress and social inclusion. “The fisher people are your people, my lord, King. All we ask is that we be treated that way” (Komarraju, The Winds of Hastinapur, 2013: 194). King Shantanu understands the grievances and announces inclusive plans for the education of the children of the fisher people, new cottages built with brick and wood and also a representation in the royal court to voice the concerns of the fisher people.

Kali plays the most crucial part of the deal carefully. On given a chance to live as a maiden in the queen’s chamber and also represent her people in the court of Hastinapur, Kali quickly refuses the offer. Kali out rightly decides that if she enters Hastinapur it would only be as queen and nothing lesser. She asserts her right as an independent woman and demands to live life on her terms with respect and dignity. The dominant mode of resistance is through voicing herself and her refusal to accept a life of anonymity. She fights “I do not want to be another of the generous king’s forgotten lovers. I do not wish to give birth to another of the king’s many forgotten sons, I wonder Father, if I will be the representative of the clan in the king’s court or in the king’s bed. ” (Komarraju, The Winds of Hastinapur ,2013: 199). Her resistance, her questioning her father and her refusal to be merely used as an object of the king’s pleasure in exchange of luxuries shows her feisty nature and places her firmly as a feminist, aware of her rights and demanding them fearlessly. She finally demands that if the king really wishes to take her “I must go as his queen”. (Komarraju, The Winds of Hastinapur, 2013: 200). King Shantanu obviously is in a dilemma over the demand of Kali being taken as his queen. Kali, at her end is very clear about her plans – that if it came to a choice between herself and her settlement she would not budge from her demand. It is admirable that Kali firmly and clearly maps an inclusive plan of progress and better life for

her settlement. She takes charge, demands, resists not just as an individual voice seeking a life of dignity but becomes a spokes person for the welfare of her entire community- She speaks for herself as a feminist and also for her marginalised community as a subaltern. She is an empowered woman, ambitious with a clear and farsighted plan of progress. Her plans succeed and Kali becomes Satyavati, the queen of Hastinapur. On two counts Kali very clearly enters into the male bastion. She is the son-equivalent to her father. She takes on the dual roles of being a son to her father and also dons the role of being the representative or leader of her community as the chief's heir. Firstly, she earns livelihood by ferrying people in her boat and adds to the family earnings which is the traditional role of a son. Secondly, she becomes the spokesperson of the rights of her own community and in doing so she takes on the role of a male heir to her father who is the chief of the fisher folk. In this dual role she clearly enters into male space, playing the role of a son and an heir, both of which break the patriarchal stereotypes.

In her transition from Kali to Satyavati, she evolves and grows constantly. After the death of Shantanu and her son Chitrangada she discusses political strategies with Devavrata. Even as Kali the fisher girl, she was sure of herself and what she wanted. As queen mother of Hastinapur too, Satyavati is politically aware, constantly discussing and planning with Devavrata. She is at ease in the political space of men - be it her thoughts on Panchala's moves of threat, its reliance primarily on trade for food grain, the people of Panchala being the best stone crushers, Panchala stock piling weapons or the possibility of Panchala taking on the might of Kosala or Kasi. Her strategies to make friends with Anga and Magadha to gain access to information to plan how these kingdoms could be attacked (Komarraju, *The Winds of Hastinapur*, 2013: 229-230). These clearly present Satyavati's political acumen and strategic planning which place her comfortably in the space that is essentially a male bastion. Amidst her life as a queen and her plans of war, trading and expansion of Hastinapur, her inner desires continue to spill over unabashedly. As she grows both in stature and in age, deep within, Satyavati also guiltlessly imagines the possibility of having married the youthful Devavrata instead of the old Shantanu. In her imagination it is clear that Devavrata is the person of her desire. (Komarraju, *The Winds of Hastinapur*, 2013: 233). Faced with possibility of Hastinapur being without a king in the wake of her losing Vichitravirya, the possibility of the seed of fisher people that she placed on the throne being lost without lasting a generation (Komarraju, *The Winds of Hastinapur*, 2013: 236), she remembers her son (first

born) born through Parashara. She is not inhibited by qualms of clan, honour, etc; and she was not scared or ashamed of being known as an unwed-mother albeit recognising her so only when the need arose⁶. She sets out to seek her son with a single minded pursuit to see that her line of fisher – people continued to sit on the throne of Hastinapur. The deep seated aspiration to see the continuation of her line on the throne is in itself very patriarchal – similar to kings desirous of sons continuing their legacy through progeny. Though this desire of sons continuing the line is a patriarchal system, Satyavati ‘s determination to continue her seed sees a role reversal . She and not any man decides that her line would continue. Unafraid of the societal norms she finds her son before wedlock Krishna Dwaipayana and decides on the practice of *Niyoga* to ensure that her daughters –in-law Ambika and Amalika beget children through Dwaipayana. Her obsession with the continuity of her race is very patriarchal. She seems to use the same system and practice of patriarchy to ensure that her race continues to rule Hastinapur is her way of resisting the patriarchal structures. Her notion on women as creators being instrumental in perpetuating their races is a very radical deviation from patriarchal structures and beliefs. The vision of Parashurama brings in a startling truth to her... the truth that Parashurama failed in cleansing the earth of Kshatriyas because all the Kshatriya women he pardoned went on to beget sons from Brahmin fathers and perpetuated their races so it was not the men that were important (Komarraju, The Winds of Hastinapur, 2013:269). This is a very strong perception which shakes the very fundamentals of patriarchy and brings in the crucial role of women as creators in contrast to the conventional patriarchal perception of men being responsible for creation and continuation of a race or family.

Satyavati ‘s support to Amba and her admonishing Devavrata when he tells Amba that as a prize of battle she had no say in whether she will be sent away or kept back – “Dare you not speak that way to a maiden! ” (Komarraju, The Winds of Hastinapur, 2013: 263) . Satyavati lets Amba live her life, “Then you will go . Hastina will not have a queen against her will” (Komarraju, The Winds of Hastinapur, 2013: 261). She shows the same concern towards Shubha (in whom she sees her own reflection) who wants to have her baby and Satyavati quickly agrees and assures the girl of all comforts. Satyavati’s bonding with Amba and Shubha brings out her concern for the rights of these two women and also a deep sense of respect for them as women. She stands by them in their demands or wishes as women.

⁶ Kahlon, Meena: Women in Mahabharata: Fighting Patriarchy

Examined through the lens of feminism, Kali/Satyavati is never found to be a victim. She does not accept being victimised even when ignored and lonely. She is happy being on her own and does not allow circumstances to passivize her in any way. She is aware of her desires and also her rights over her body. She is unapologetic about her desires and her sexual freedom. She chooses to have her child (albeit leaves him behind). She demands inclusive progress for her clan from the king; she demands and gets the rights of her children to the throne of Hastinapur. In conventional readings, Satyavati is presented as an ambitious, ruthless fisher girl who through cunning became a queen. However, Komarraju's Satyavati is a practical and matter-of-fact woman who knows what she wants and gets it too. She resists and breaks ever probable rule laid down by patriarchy rises beyond situations to empower herself. Her story is about absolute power. She weaves her own patterns into her life, unafraid to mother a son out of wedlock, though abandons him, yet later when need arises, accepts her illegitimate son father children from her daughters-in-law only to see that her clan continues to rule the throne of Hastinapur. What is endearing about her is that she sees her follies and willingly accepts them but never does she play a victim. She singularly takes responsibility of her choices and her actions, no matter what the outcomes are. The journey from Kali to the sensuous Satyavati is one that is free from guilt, falsehood and hypocrisy. She does not shy away from what she wants to see, have or say. She can be clearly seen as an early second wave feminist in terms of her awareness of the rights of her body, her desires and her freedom of choices. There could be a sense of surprise at her obsession with continuing her progeny (which is essentially a patriarchal thought), and the startling realisation that it is women and not men who are creators and hence responsible for the continuation of a race/family is a novel thought (could definitely be her mode of resistance) in the very patriarchal system that she as a woman fights against. Being a not-so-focussed upon female character in the Mahabharata, she remains blurred in memory. However, Komarraju's Satyavati is right at the centre stage voicing her community's rights and her own, as a woman. She brings in a hitherto unexplored perspective to the Mahabharata and the chain of events that are an outcome of her decisions. She goes through every phase unafraid and without regret. As Bhattacharya, says: "Modern-day women could well wish that they were half as confident, clear-headed and assertive of their desires and goals as Satyavati."⁷

⁷ Bhattacharya, Pradip . Kunti and Satyavati : Sexually Assertive Women of the Mahabharata

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