

## Unveiling an Apsara's Agency and Empowerment in Kavita Kane's *Menaka's Choice*

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### Abstract

*This research paper aims to examine agency and empowerment within the pages of Kavita Kane's *Menaka's Choice*. The novel offers a captivating exploration of women's empowerment in a mythological context, presenting a multifaceted depiction of the agency. Menaka is an apsara and was born from Lord Brahma's mind. Traditionally an apsara was expected to play the role of a seductress but Kavita Kane gives a voice to Menaka and is portrayed as a woman with independent choices. Menaka's transformation from a celestial nymph to a woman with desires, choices, and aspirations exemplifies the theme of empowerment. Kane also highlights the suffering of Menaka due to societal norms and expectations. This novel also sheds light on Menaka's autonomy and her decisions, which were taken in a world controlled by powerful male deities. This paper delves into the intricacies of agency, illuminating how Menaka, navigates and asserts her agency in diverse and unexpected ways, effectively challenging established societal norms and expectations. Through meticulous analysis, this research paper unveils the intricate layers of agency in the lives of its characters.*

**Keywords:** *Agency, Empowerment, Mythological Fiction, Women's Identity, Gender Role, Kavita Kane, Menaka's Choice, Feminist Analysis, Destiny and Choice*

### Introduction

Kavita Kane is a well-known contemporary Indian Mythologist and a revisionist myth-maker. She served as a senior journalist for 20 years in Daily News and Analysis, The Times of India, and other media houses. She focuses on retelling Indian Myths and addresses those aspects that are rarely found in the original epics. She chooses the lesser-known women characters from the Indian Epics and retells them with a feminist voice. She is the author of seven novels – *Karna's Wife: An Outcast Queen*, *Sita's Sister*, *Menaka's Choice*, *Lanka's Princess*, *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, *Ahalya's Awakening*, and her recent one *Goddess Saraswati*.

Agency and empowerment are related ideas that refer to a person's ability to make decisions on their own, take charge of their own destiny, and affect change. The ability to act and make decisions entails agency, frequently in the face of societal standards or limitations. On the other side, empowerment describes the process of acquiring the self-assurance, knowledge, and resources required to improve

one's agency. These ideas are essential when talking about personal autonomy, self-determination, and social progress because they show how each person has the power to determine their own path, confront injustices, and actively engage in society. This encourages both individual development and societal change.

*Menaka's Choice* by Kavita Kane is a thought-provoking novel that delves deep into the intricate world of Apsaras, celestial beings often associated with grace and beauty in Indian mythology. This novel takes us on a captivating journey through the life of Menaka, one of the most renowned Apsaras, as she grapples with the choices she must make in a world where her agency and empowerment are often overshadowed by the expectations and demands of the dominant male gods.

In this novel, Menaka's empowerment and agency are shown as she makes her way through the complex web of love, desire, and responsibility in the celestial realm. For those who are interested in mythology, feminism, and the ongoing struggle for personal autonomy, *Menaka's Choice*

is a compelling exploration of a woman's journey to define herself in a world where her choices are frequently overlooked. It also sheds light on the timeless theme of empowerment and self-determination.

### **Menaka: An Apsara**

Apsaras occupies a prominent place in Hindu mythology. Apsaras are celestial nymphs, captivating divine dancers, and enchantresses. They are often depicted as symbols of alluring beauty and elegance, enchanting gods and sages alike with their ethereal charm. D.D. Kosambi in his book *Myth and Reality*, argues that Apsaras occupied a prominent place in the Vedic period and were degraded in the later period. He says that the apsaras Menaka, Ghritachi, Alambusa, etc. were treated like mother goddesses in the Vedic period. Later, they were perceived as degraded celestial prostitutes. Traditionally, they have been portrayed as tools of seduction and temptation that are used by Lord Indra to disturb the penance of great Sages. However, beneath their enchanting allure, Apsaras like Menaka possess their own desires, aspirations, and challenges.

Kavita Kane's *Menaka's Choice* is one such tale of Hindu mythology. It is about a celestial being an Apsara Menaka, who resides in heaven. Menaka, in particular, emerges as a central character who refuses to be confined to the passive, decorative roles assigned to Apsaras. She seeks to carve out her own path, challenge her agency, and make her own choices against divine expectations. She is the most beautiful woman who was born during the churning of ocean milk. "She rose diaphanously from the Ocean of Milk" (Kane, 1). She is a celestial-nymph who is born from the mind of Lord Brahma with high intelligence along ravishing beauty. Everyman in heaven wants her to be their wife, even the king Indra. "But she was Menaka, born of the mind, the imagination, from the mind of Lord Brahma, the creator himself" (Kane, 4).

In Heaven, apsaras are allowed only to make love and leave. They are forbidden from marrying the person they love. Unlike the other apsaras, Menaka falls in love with Vishwvasu, the Devagandharva. They decided to marry each other against the rules of heaven. This made lord Indra angry. She tried to convince Lord Indrabhy saying

"Fortunately I chose someone from our world as my mate, not a mortal, not a rishi, not a deva" (Kane, 16). These words made Indra angrier because he was jealous of Vishwvasu, whom Menaka chose over him. Here, Menaka voices the dearth of choices of celestial beings in heaven by saying "We always have choices we select them, make us" (Kane, 19). Later, she got married to Vishwvasu, a Gandharva king. This marriage was not accepted by Indra. After marriage, they gave birth to a daughter. Even, childbearing is not accepted in heaven and Menaka was asked either to abandon her child or leave Vasu and Indraloka with the child. But, she is expected to obey her king's orders and not to have choices of her own. She says "We are but a Gandharva and an apsara, destined to give pleasure to all but not ourselves. And it is in such a heaven we live" (Kane, 36). These lines show the pathetic condition of celestial beings' lives. They are expected to give pleasure to others but not to themselves.

Later, being jealous of Vishwvasu Indra made a plan to kick him out of heaven. Rambha, another apsara helped Indra. Vishwvasu was transformed into a one-eyed monster called Kabandh and sent to a forest. Menaka lost her love of life. When she came to know about Indra and Rambha's wicked plan, She decided that "They have to pay for this deceit" (Kane, 73). She questions King Indra about this

"Say it lord. Admit it. And that's what I am, a reluctant seductress. To make love, to lure but not for my pleasures. A Woman of lust but who cannot love, wed, conceive. Your land of great wealth and wantonness doesn't favour social equality!" (Kane, 46).

After Vishwvasu left heaven, Menaka refused to dance in the court till his return. She also refused to obey the royal orders or perform the roles of a heavenly courtesan. By exhibiting strong refusal, she made Indra provide a solution to Vasu's return to heaven.

Later, she was sent to Vishwamitra to ruin his Tapas. Vishwamitra is performing strong penance to please God and to attain the position of Brahma Rishi. This made Indra fearful about his throne. He felt that he may lose his heaven if the sage Vishwamitra attained more power. So, He ordered Menaka to seduce him, destroy his powers, and trap him in domestic life. She boldly questions Indra

saying “You can't order me, remember? I don't perform for you any longer so why would I agree to your sleazy seduction games?” (Kane, 103). Initially, she disagrees with doing this but finally, she agrees to erase the boredom that she now suffers in heaven. At the outset of the novel, Menaka makes a daring choice to leave the celestial world, defying the conventions of her society. This decision serves as a testament to her agency as she embarks on a journey to explore the mortal world and assert her independence.

But Menaka's seduction of Vishwamitra opens another chapter of love in her life. Initially, she was concerned about her duty but gradually she fell in love with Vishwamitra.

“Love starts, at first sight, the visual contact. Then comes the desire, when both the hearts and minds are in flux, full of intense thoughts and hopes, followed by a determination to get the lover and love reciprocated...Last of course is the end of that love—either through separation, betrayal, or Physical death of the lovers.” ( Kane,111)

Menaka developed a deep love for Vishwamitra and did not want to be the cause of his destruction. She always encouraged him to continue his meditation and never distracted him from it. This is because she loves him genuinely just like Vishwvasu. She called him Kaushik, the original name of the great sage when he was the king. She also said, “I have never loved a man as I love you” (Kane, 133).

Later, 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 lost her, he would destroy Indra and his heaven and make him allow her to stay on earth. She struggles in between the dream of domestic life with Vishwamitra and her duty as an Apsara, as Kama reminds her. “He was never yours to take. He was a target; you are a strategy” (Kane, 143). Here, Menaka thinks about her own ‘identity’ and duty as an Apsara, “Menaka was supposed to be providence to change the future of Vishwamitra, the means and the reason for his fall from the glory. She had fallen a victim herself” (Kane, 114). She was struck between the roles of loving wife and dutiful apsara. But, she cannot choose any one of the two Indra

questions her presence with Vishwamitra: “How many more years do you intend to be with him, it cannot be forever! (Kane,156)” She declares herself defeated in front of mighty Indra, as she confesses to Indra. But in the end, Menaka is forced to leave the sage for his own good. If she returns to heaven, it may lead Vishwamitra to lose everything because of his infinite love for her. Moreover, she also needs to leave her loving daughter.

But on Indra's orders, she returned to heaven subsiding her motherly affection and love. Every woman considers motherhood as their duty but she was even denied from it. She always wanted to lead a family life but she was never allowed to do that. She questions Indra about the injustice being done to her. She also questions her role not just as an apsara but as a lover, a wife, a mother, and as a woman. But, Indra answered her “Do not humanize our world Menaka!” ( Kane, 47)

After separating from Vishwamitra, Even though she yearns to meet him, Menaka is determined not to do so. Although she loved Vishwvasu with joy. She adored Vishwamitra with guilt. While Vasu's departure from her was unintentional, the other was the outcome of a decision she made. She meets Vasu again, but she never forgets Vishwamitra. Menaka's interactions with the sage Vishwamitra highlight her agency in forming relationships. Despite being sent by the gods to disrupt his meditation, Menaka's genuine affection for Vishwamitra leads to a complex romantic relationship. This relationship illustrates her emotional autonomy and agency in matters of the heart.

Menaka's love for her daughters can be seen in the later part of the novel. When her daughter Pramadavara, reaches 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?” (Kane, 92). She also met her daughter Shakuntala at the time of trouble and reminded her “As I said earlier, you are a braver person than I was” (Kane, 256).

### Conclusion

This novel offers a compelling exploration of Menaka's empowerment and agency, challenging conventional narratives and shedding light on the struggles faced by its characters. Menaka, an Apsara born from Lord Brahma's

mind, defies traditional expectations by asserting her independence and making choices that go against celestial norms. Her transformation from a celestial nymph into a woman with desires, aspirations, and the courage to follow her heart represents empowerment. This internal conflict between her individual desires and her cultural duty, highlighting the influence of societal norms on her choices.

Kane skillfully navigates the complexities of agency in a world dominated by powerful male deities. Menaka's ability to make choices, whether in love, marriage, or motherhood, is a testament to her resilience in the face of societal pressures and expectations.

Furthermore, this narrative underscores the universal nature of agency and empowerment, transcending the boundaries of mythology to resonate with the human experience. It serves as a reminder that the pursuit of personal autonomy and the ability to shape one's destiny are fundamental aspects of the human condition, irrespective of the context. In *Menaka's Choice*, Kavita Kane gives voice to a character who has never been highlighted in mythology, allowing Menaka to rise above her predetermined role and assert her identity.

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