

RE-WRITING THE VILLAINESS: PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES AND MORAL AMBIGUITY IN VAISHNAVI PATEL'S *KAIKEYI*

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Abstract

Mythological retellings have become an important literary medium for re-examining marginalized voices that were silenced or misrepresented in traditional narratives. Vaishnavi Patel's *Kaikeyi* (2022) presents one such revision by reconstructing Queen Kaikeyi, a character traditionally portrayed as the principal antagonist in the *Ramayana*. Rather than depicting her as an ambitious and manipulative queen responsible for Rama's exile, Patel offers a nuanced representation of Kaikeyi as an intelligent, politically aware, and emotionally complex woman negotiating the constraints of a patriarchal society. This paper examines how Patel rewrites the image of the "villainess" by exposing the patriarchal structures that shape Kaikeyi's life and by emphasizing the moral ambiguity of her decisions. Employing feminist literary criticism and myth revision theory, the study investigates the relationship between gender, power, agency, and morality in the novel. It argues that Kaikeyi's actions emerge not from selfish ambition but from her desire to secure justice, autonomy, and political responsibility within a social order governed by male authority. The novel challenges the binary opposition between heroism and villainy by presenting morality as context-dependent rather than absolute. Furthermore, Patel's reinterpretation questions traditional notions of female virtue, obedience, and sacrifice while encouraging readers to reconsider inherited cultural narratives.

Keywords: Vaishnavi Patel, *Kaikeyi*, Feminism, Patriarchy, Mythological Retelling, Moral Ambiguity, Female Agency, Gender Politics, Villainess, Indian Mythology.

1. Introduction

Mythology has long functioned as a cultural archive through which societies preserve their beliefs, values, traditions, and moral principles. Indian mythology, particularly the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, has profoundly influenced social consciousness by shaping ideals of righteousness, duty, kingship, and gender roles. While these epics celebrate male heroism and divine authority, the representation of women has often been governed by patriarchal expectations that define female virtue through obedience, sacrifice, and silence. Women who conform to these ideals are remembered as symbols of devotion and purity, whereas those who question authority or exercise independent judgment are frequently portrayed as morally flawed or villainous. Consequently, many female characters have been reduced to one-dimensional representations that ignore the complexities of their motivations and lived experiences. Among these characters, Kaikeyi occupies a particularly controversial position in the *Ramayana*. Traditionally remembered as the queen who demanded Rama's exile and secured the throne for her son Bharata, she has been depicted for centuries as selfish, manipulative, and power-hungry. Her image as the principal antagonist has remained largely unquestioned within popular retellings and cultural memory. Such portrayals, however, often overlook the political environment, familial pressures, and patriarchal structures that influenced her decisions. They also neglect her earlier achievements as a courageous warrior, an intelligent queen, and a trusted advisor to King Dasharatha. The

simplification of Kaikeyi's character reflects broader patriarchal tendencies to judge women primarily through the consequences of their actions while ignoring the structural conditions under which those actions occur.

Contemporary literature has increasingly challenged these inherited narratives by revisiting myths from marginalized perspectives. Feminist mythological retellings seek not merely to retell familiar stories but to interrogate the ideological assumptions that shaped them. They recover the voices of women who were silenced, misunderstood, or condemned in traditional texts and reinterpret their roles in ways that resonate with modern concerns regarding gender equality, autonomy, and justice. Such retellings encourage readers to recognize mythology as a dynamic body of narratives capable of reflecting changing social values rather than as fixed historical truth. Vaishnavi Patel's *Kaikeyi* represents a significant contribution to this tradition of feminist mythological revision. Instead of portraying Kaikeyi as a jealous stepmother, Patel reconstructs her as a thoughtful, courageous, and politically capable woman who struggles against institutionalized patriarchy. The novel presents her decisions as the outcome of complex ethical dilemmas rather than personal malice. Through its first-person narrative, the novel grants Kaikeyi a voice that has historically been denied to her, allowing readers to witness her internal conflicts, aspirations, and emotional struggles. Patel thereby transforms a familiar villain into a deeply human character whose choices reflect the limitations imposed upon women within royal and social institutions.

2.1 Patriarchy in Ancient Indian Society

Patriarchy refers to a social system in which men exercise primary authority over political, economic, religious, and familial institutions while women are expected to occupy subordinate positions. Throughout history, patriarchal societies have assigned different responsibilities and privileges to men and women, often limiting women's participation in public life and confining them to domestic roles. In the context of ancient Indian society, these gendered expectations were reinforced through customs, religious interpretations, royal traditions, and social practices. Although women were respected as mothers, wives, and queens, their identities were largely defined through their relationships with male family members. Vaishnavi Patel's *Kaikeyi* revisits this historical framework and explores how such patriarchal structures influence the life of Queen Kaikeyi, transforming a traditionally vilified figure into a woman struggling for dignity, recognition, and political agency.

Ancient Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* have significantly shaped cultural ideals concerning duty, morality, kingship, and gender. The concept of *dharma* occupies a central place within these narratives, prescribing moral obligations for every member of society. However, these obligations were often gender-specific. Men were expected to become rulers, warriors, and protectors of the kingdom, whereas women were expected to embody obedience, devotion, patience, and self-sacrifice. Their virtue was measured not by their intellectual abilities or leadership qualities but by their willingness to serve their families and uphold social harmony. Consequently, women who challenged established norms were frequently portrayed as disruptive or morally questionable.

Patel's novel does not reject the cultural importance of the *Ramayana*; instead, it questions the patriarchal assumptions that have shaped the interpretation of its female characters. The author demonstrates that Kaikeyi's negative reputation is not simply the result of her actions but also of a social system that judges women more harshly than men. While male rulers are often remembered for their achievements despite their flaws, female characters who make controversial decisions are reduced to one-dimensional stereotypes. This unequal standard reflects the operation of patriarchy not

only within society but also within historical memory itself.

One of the defining characteristics of patriarchal society is the unequal distribution of power. Political authority, military command, inheritance, and succession are reserved almost exclusively for men. Women may possess intelligence and administrative skills, yet they rarely receive opportunities to exercise these abilities publicly. Patel highlights this contradiction through Kaikeyi, who displays remarkable political insight and strategic thinking from an early age. Despite her competence, she repeatedly encounters institutional barriers that prevent her from participating equally in governance. Her exclusion is not based on a lack of ability but on deeply rooted assumptions about gender.

The novel also illustrates how patriarchy is sustained through social institutions rather than individual actions alone. Kings, ministers, priests, and members of the royal household collectively reinforce gender hierarchies by accepting male authority as natural and unquestionable. Even individuals who respect Kaikeyi personally continue to uphold customs that restrict women's political participation. This institutional perspective is important because it shifts attention away from blaming isolated individuals and instead exposes the broader cultural mechanisms that reproduce inequality across generations.

Religion plays a complex role in maintaining patriarchal values within the narrative. Traditional interpretations of *dharma* frequently emphasize women's duty toward fathers, husbands, and sons, presenting obedience as the highest expression of feminine virtue. Patel complicates this understanding by portraying Kaikeyi as a woman who reflects deeply upon justice, responsibility, and ethical leadership. Rather than accepting every tradition without question, she evaluates decisions according to their consequences for the kingdom and its people. Through this portrayal, the novel distinguishes between genuine moral responsibility and social expectations that merely preserve male dominance.

3. Reconstructing the Villainess: Moral Ambiguity and Female Agency

One of the most remarkable aspects of Vaishnavi Patel's *Kaikeyi* is its reconstruction of one of the most misunderstood women in Indian mythology. In the traditional *Ramayana*, Kaikeyi is remembered almost exclusively as the queen who demanded Rama's exile and secured the throne for her son Bharata. This single act has defined her identity for centuries, reducing her to the role of a jealous stepmother and an ambitious queen. Patel's novel challenges this long-established image by presenting Kaikeyi as a complex, intelligent, and emotionally conflicted woman whose actions arise from political responsibility, personal conviction, and the limitations imposed by patriarchal society. Through this reinterpretation, the novel transforms the conventional "villainess" into a multidimensional protagonist whose story invites readers to reconsider inherited assumptions about morality, power, and female agency.

Traditional mythological narratives often depend upon clear distinctions between heroes and villains. Characters are generally portrayed as either virtuous or evil, leaving little room for psychological complexity. Kaikeyi's characterization in many popular retellings follows this pattern. She is blamed for disrupting the harmony of Ayodhya and is frequently represented as selfish, manipulative, and power-hungry. Her earlier achievements as a courageous warrior and a devoted queen receive little attention, while her motivations are simplified and often attributed to jealousy or blind ambition. Patel rejects this one-dimensional portrayal by restoring Kaikeyi's voice and allowing readers to witness her internal struggles. The first-person narrative enables the audience to understand her fears, doubts, aspirations, and ethical dilemmas, thereby replacing stereotype with psychological realism.

The concept of moral ambiguity lies at the heart of Patel's reinterpretation. Rather than presenting Kaikeyi's decisions as entirely right or entirely wrong, the novel suggests that morality is shaped by context, intention, and circumstance. Kaikeyi is not portrayed as a flawless heroine whose every action deserves admiration. Instead, she makes difficult choices that produce painful consequences for herself and those she loves. Her decision to claim the two boons promised by Dasharatha becomes a moment of profound ethical conflict rather than an act of simple selfishness. Patel encourages readers to recognize that individuals often make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, where every available option carries significant risks and sacrifices.

This moral complexity distinguishes *Kaikeyi* from traditional narratives that rely upon absolute judgments. The novel demonstrates that ethical decisions cannot always be evaluated through simplistic categories of good and evil. Kaikeyi sincerely believes that her actions will contribute to political stability and fulfill her understanding of royal duty. Although the consequences of her choices prove tragic, Patel emphasizes that good intentions do not always produce desirable outcomes. This nuanced treatment of morality reflects contemporary literary approaches that value psychological depth over moral certainty.

Equally significant is Patel's emphasis on female agency. Agency refers to an individual's ability to make independent decisions and influence the course of events despite social constraints. Throughout the novel, Kaikeyi refuses to remain a passive observer within a political system dominated by men. She actively studies governance, participates in discussions concerning state affairs, and attempts to shape the future of Ayodhya according to her understanding of justice. Her desire to participate in political decision-making challenges patriarchal assumptions that women should remain confined to domestic responsibilities. Although her authority is repeatedly questioned, Kaikeyi continues to assert her right to think, judge, and act independently.

Patel also demonstrates that agency does not require absolute freedom. Kaikeyi's choices are constantly shaped by expectations surrounding queenship, motherhood, and feminine virtue. She must negotiate personal desires, family obligations, political responsibilities, and societal pressures simultaneously. Her actions therefore emerge from a complex interaction between individual determination and structural limitation. By acknowledging these constraints, the novel avoids portraying empowerment as a simple triumph over oppression. Instead, it presents agency as the ability to exercise judgment and maintain personal integrity even within restrictive social systems.

Another important feature of Patel's reconstruction is the humanization of Kaikeyi's emotional life. Unlike the distant and often unsympathetic figure presented in many traditional versions of the *Ramayana*, Patel's Kaikeyi experiences love, grief, disappointment, guilt, and uncertainty. She questions her own decisions and reflects upon their consequences with honesty and emotional vulnerability. These moments of introspection allow readers to recognize her humanity rather than viewing her solely through the lens of historical condemnation. By emphasizing emotional complexity, Patel demonstrates that women in mythology deserve the same psychological depth traditionally granted to male heroes.

The novel further challenges the cultural tendency to evaluate women according to impossible moral standards. Male rulers who make controversial political decisions are frequently remembered as courageous leaders acting in the interest of the kingdom, whereas women who exercise similar authority are often condemned as manipulative or power-hungry. Kaikeyi's reputation reflects this double standard. Patel argues that her historical image has been

shaped not only by her actions but also by patriarchal expectations regarding appropriate female behaviour. The novel therefore encourages readers to question whether Kaikeyi became a villain because of what she did or because society could not accept a woman exercising political power.

Ultimately, *Kaikeyi* replaces the simplistic opposition between heroine and villain with a more sophisticated understanding of human character. Patel's protagonist is neither entirely innocent nor entirely guilty; she is a woman attempting to navigate an imperfect world governed by competing loyalties, ethical dilemmas, and institutional inequalities. Through this reconstruction, the novel restores dignity and complexity to a character who has long been denied both. It also demonstrates that mythological retellings possess the power to challenge inherited narratives, recover marginalized voices, and encourage contemporary readers to rethink the relationship between gender, morality, and historical memory. This reinterpretation establishes Kaikeyi not as the villainess of tradition but as a symbol of female agency and moral complexity in contemporary literature.

4. Feminist Rewriting of Mythology

Mythology has always been a powerful medium through which societies preserve cultural beliefs, moral values, and collective memories. However, myths are not fixed narratives; they continue to evolve as each generation reinterprets them according to changing social, political, and cultural contexts. Contemporary feminist writers have increasingly engaged with traditional myths to recover the voices of women who were marginalized, misunderstood, or silenced within dominant narratives. Vaishnavi Patel's *Kaikeyi* is an important example of this feminist approach to mythological revision. By retelling the story of Kaikeyi from her own perspective, Patel challenges conventional interpretations of the *Ramayana* and questions the patriarchal assumptions that have shaped the representation of female characters.

Traditional mythological narratives often present women through limited roles connected to their relationships with men. Female characters are frequently defined as daughters, wives, mothers, or sources of conflict rather than as individuals with independent desires and ambitions. In many interpretations of the *Ramayana*, Kaikeyi's identity becomes completely associated with her demand for Rama's exile. Her political awareness, courage, and personal struggles are overshadowed by the negative consequences of her decision. Feminist rewriting attempts to challenge such one-sided representations by examining the experiences, motivations, and social conditions behind women's actions.

Patel's *Kaikeyi* functions as a feminist retelling because it shifts the centre of the narrative from a male hero to a previously condemned female character. Instead of beginning with Rama's greatness or Kaikeyi's alleged wrongdoing, the novel focuses on Kaikeyi's journey of self-discovery, intellectual development, and struggle for recognition. This narrative shift represents an important act of literary resistance because it challenges the authority of traditional storytelling. By allowing Kaikeyi to narrate her own experiences, Patel gives her the power to define herself rather than allowing society to define her through accusations and stereotypes.

A major feature of feminist myth revision is the recovery of suppressed voices. Women in traditional myths often exist within stories created and interpreted primarily through male perspectives. Their thoughts, emotions, and motivations remain unexplored, leaving readers with incomplete understandings of their characters. In *Kaikeyi*, Patel addresses this absence by presenting the queen's internal world in detail. Readers encounter her fears, ambitions,

frustrations, and ethical struggles, which creates a more balanced understanding of her character. The novel demonstrates that the difference between a villain and a misunderstood individual often depends on whose perspective is being heard.

The feminist rewriting of *Kaikeyi* also involves questioning traditional concepts of female virtue. In patriarchal societies, women are often considered ideal when they demonstrate obedience, sacrifice, and emotional restraint. Characters who challenge these expectations are frequently portrayed negatively. Kaikeyi's desire for political participation and intellectual independence conflicts with conventional ideas of femininity, making her vulnerable to criticism. Patel challenges this framework by presenting ambition and leadership as qualities that should not be restricted by gender. The novel suggests that a woman's desire for authority does not automatically represent selfishness or moral failure.

Furthermore, *Kaikeyi* examines the relationship between mythology and power. Myths often reflect the values of the societies that preserve them, meaning that representations of heroes and villains are influenced by existing power structures. Feminist reinterpretations expose how certain voices gain authority while others are marginalized. By rewriting Kaikeyi's story, Patel questions who has the power to create history and whose experiences are excluded from cultural memory. The novel suggests that historical narratives require continuous examination because they may contain hidden assumptions about gender and authority.

5. Suggestions

1. More mythological texts should be studied through feminist perspectives to recover marginalized female voices.
2. Contemporary writers should continue exploring forgotten women characters from traditional narratives.
3. Literary studies should examine myths as evolving narratives rather than fixed interpretations.
4. Researchers should focus on the relationship between gender, power, and cultural memory in mythology.
5. Feminist retellings should be included in academic curricula to encourage critical thinking about traditional narratives.
6. Comparative studies between ancient myths and modern adaptations can provide deeper understanding of changing gender perspectives.

6. Conclusion

Vaishnavi Patel's *Kaikeyi* significantly challenges the traditional portrayal of Queen Kaikeyi as merely a villainous figure by presenting her as a complex woman shaped by patriarchal structures, political pressures, and personal struggles. Through feminist mythological revision, Patel gives voice to a character whose perspective has been historically ignored and reexamines the relationship between gender, power, and morality. The novel reveals how patriarchal systems limit women's choices while simultaneously judging them for the consequences of those limitations. By portraying Kaikeyi's decisions through the lens of moral ambiguity, Patel moves beyond the simplistic division between hero and villain and presents a more nuanced understanding of human agency. The reconstruction of Kaikeyi highlights the importance of questioning inherited narratives and recognizing the influence of social

structures on historical memory. Ultimately, *Kaikeyi* demonstrates that mythological retellings can become powerful tools for feminist expression, allowing marginalized voices to reclaim identity, challenge traditional assumptions, and contribute to contemporary discussions on equality, justice, and women's agency.

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