

**KAIKEYI: BEYOND MYTH AND MODERNITY IN AMISH
TRIPATHI'S RAMCHANDRA SERIES**

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper focuses on one of the most controversial figures in Hindu mythology: Kaikeyi. Traditionally depicted as a naïve and notorious mother in Indian folklore, this study re-examines her character through a postmodern lens, aiming to establish her as a truly powerful woman. Kaikeyi emerges as an unconquerable and dignified figure of her time.

One key concept in postmodernism is the idea of the metanarrative. Metanarratives offer a fascinating lens for literary analysis. Rooted in postmodern philosophy, this concept challenges definitive absolutes—such as Truth—suggesting they are either highly elusive or non-existent. Consequently, postmodernism it resists clear definitions, embracing ambiguity and complexity.

This paper attempts to re-envision the myth of Kaikeyi through the lens of Amish Tripathi's Ram Chandra Series. By doing so, it sheds new light on her character, presenting Kaikeyi not as a villain but as a figure of immense strength and dignity. This reinterpretation challenges traditional narratives and offers a fresh perspective on her role in Hindu mythology.

Abbreviation:

SOI= Ram: Scion of Ikshwaku

WOM= Sita: Warrior of Mithila

WOM= Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta

INTRODUCTION

Amish skilfully portrays several powerful and courageous female characters in his Ram Chandra Series. This series features many mythological women who have not been celebrated for ages, yet without them, the Ramayana could not be imagined as an epic. These women, with their distinct histories, characters, and brilliance, include Kaikeyi, Kaushalya, Manthara, Samichi, Sita, Urmila, Sumitra, and Shurpanakha. Amish skilfully brings out their unique identities and existence within the Ramayana in the series.

Kaikeyi is one of the most dominant characters in the Ramayana. She has faced criticism from Indian folklore since the myth of Ram came into existence. Ram, the eldest son of Dashratha and the crown prince of Ayodhya, was about to ascend the throne when his stepmother Kaikeyi disrupted the entire plan. Instigated by her hump-backed maidservant, Manthara, Kaikeyi demanded from the king the two boons he had once promised her in battle. The king was in a dilemma but had to fulfil the promise. As a result, Ram was exiled for 14 years. He went to the forest with his devoted wife Sita and his loyal youngest brother Lakshmana. During the exile, King Dashrath died, grieving the separation from his son.

Kaikeyi also suffers in multiple roles: as a wife, a mother, and a friend of Manthara. In Indian mythology, she is blamed for her husband's death. King Dashrath's painful demise is also attributed to the curse given by Sharvan's parents, with Kaikeyi merely serving as the medium for its fulfilment. Her own son disowns her, expressing shame in being her child. Additionally, she is victimized due to her friendship with Manthara, who misguides her regarding the reign of Ayodhya. Throughout her life, Kaikeyi is seen as an evil character in the Ramayana. In his writings, Amish also presents her with a similar temperament. However, Amish portrays her as stronger and more powerful compared to traditional mythological tales, while still linking her character to the original mythology. The mythological Kaikeyi is not a submissive wife to Dashrath; she is one of the rebellious women of Hindu mythology.

Amish's Kaikeyi is also portrayed as a strong, revolutionary, and brilliant woman in the series. She plays a very significant role in the life of Dashrath, serving as a source of inspiration for her husband. She stands by him, even in war. Amish depicts Queen Kaikeyi's bravery from the very first book of the Ram Chandra Series. The story begins with a flashback where Ram and Lakshman are in the jungle hunting. The second chapter showcases the bravery of Queen Kaikeyi. Like the mythological Kaikeyi, she saves her husband's life from Raavan's arrows. Distrusting her father's ability to protect her husband, she takes matters into her own hands, visiting the battlefield to save Dashrath. He is grievously injured in the war against Raavan, the main trader of Lanka, and is on the brink of death when Kaikeyi intervenes. She rescues him from the jaws of death. As she reaches the battlefield:

““Kaikeyi stood resolute in her chariot near the clearing along the line of bushes, her demeanour admirably calm. As her father’s horse drew near, she reached across and dragged Dashrath’s prone body into the chariot. She didn’t turn to look at her father, who had also been pierced by many arrows. She picked up the reins and whipped the four horses tethered to her chariot.”” (27)

The war between Dashrath and Raavan immortalizes Kaikeyi as a brave and indomitable figure in Indian mythological fiction. Unlike conventional portrayals of feminine beauty, Kaikeyi is depicted as resplendent and muscular, akin to a warrior. The description of the war underscores her as a true warrior and devoted wife to Dashrath, willing to sacrifice her life for his safety. Despite sustaining wounds from Lankan soldiers' arrows, she remains undeterred, continuing to drive her chariot without pause, her injuries forgotten in her singular focus on saving her husband. As Amish eloquently describes:

““She heard the arrow’s threatening hum before it slammed into her back with vicious force. Its shock was so massive that it threw her forward as her head flung back. Her eyes beheld the sky as Kaikeyi screamed in agony. But she recovered immediately,

the adrenaline pumping furiously through her body, compelling her to focus. (SOI, 29)'''

Undoubtedly, during the war, Kaikeyi's driving force is her unwavering devotion as a wife to Dashrath. Her sole purpose is to protect him and ensure his survival. With a relentless determination, she relentlessly urges her chariot forward, driven by the mantra, "'Dashrath must be saved. (29)''' From her very birth, Kaikeyi embodies a resolute spirit, refusing to succumb to any weakness. Possessing formidable willpower and the ability to alter circumstances, she defies the odds to save King Dashrath's life in the heat of battle, despite sustaining numerous injuries and battle scars. Like a seasoned Kshatriya warrior, she resolves to fight, her body synchronizing with her unwavering resolve. Even as she endures one arrow after another, she remains steadfast, prepared for whatever comes next. Remarkably, not a tear is shed nor a mournful cry uttered, as depicted by the writer:

''''She heard another arrow approach, and within a flash it slammed into her right hand, cling through the forefinger cleanly; it bounced away like a pebble thrown to the side. The whip fell from her suddenly-loosened grip. Her mind was ready for further injuries now, her body equipped for pain. She didn't scream. She didn't cry. She bent quickly and picked up the whip with her left hand, transferring the reins to her bloodied right hand. She resumed the whipping with mechanical precision. (SOI, 29)'''

Despite sustaining numerous scars and severe injuries while striving to save her husband's life, Kaikeyi defies societal stereotypes that deem women weak and submissive in matters of warfare, typically associated with soft skin and delicate bodies. She displays remarkable bravery, courageously navigating the battlefield alongside her wounded husband. Even as she herself sustains injuries, including to her eyes, Kaikeyi refuses to yield, exemplifying her unwavering resolve. Her pregnancy during this tumultuous time goes largely unnoticed, overshadowed by her passionate commitment and iron will. Throughout the series, Kaikeyi's passionate spirit shines through, notably when she stands equal to Kaushalya in naming her son, Ram, refusing to be overshadowed in such significant moments:

''''His mother, Kaikeyi, did not know at the time of the great battle with Raavan that she was carrying Dashrath's child in her womb. Vashishta was aware that Kaikeyi was a passionate, willful woman. She was ambitious for herself and those she viewed as her own. She had not settled for the eldest queen, Kaushalya, being one up on her by choosing a great name for her son. Her son, then, was the namesake of the legendary Chandravanshi emperor, Bharat, who had ruled millennia ago.''' (SOI, 40)

Queen Kaikeyi exemplifies the role of a loving and dutiful wife to King Dashrath, as evidenced by her actions during the war. Her physical strength, demonstrated by enduring arrows without shedding a tear, is mirrored by her strong heart and mind. When it comes time for Ram and Bharat to depart for education in the Gurukul, Kaikeyi's demeanor diverges from that of a typical mother bidding farewell to her children. Instead of succumbing to tears, she asserts her authority, admonishing Bharat for his emotional outburst. With a gaze of exasperation, she implores him to embody the qualities of a future king, urging him to make her proud and fulfill his destined role: "'You are my son! Don't be such a sissy! Behave like the king you will be one day! Go, make your mother proud!'" (SOI, 43)

As Ram matures, he becomes aware of the truth regarding Kaikeyi's temperament, shedding light on the prevalent concept of gender inequality in Indian culture. Throughout history, women have been denied the right to inherit maternal property, a systemic injustice that persisted until the Indian constitution granted women this right in 2005. Despite this legal provision, cultural norms and patriarchal hegemony continue to discourage women from asserting their rights to maternal legacy.

Ram discovers that Kaikeyi is the rightful heir to the throne of Kekeya, possessing the capability to govern the kingdom effectively. However, she has been denied the crown solely because of her gender. It is a poignant realization that a woman with the aptitude and competence to manage her father's business is unjustly deprived of this opportunity due to societal gender biases. Ram comes to understand the anguish and frustration experienced by Queen Kaikeyi. He recognizes that while she may not be able to ascend to the throne herself, she harbors dreams of fulfilling her legacy through her son, Bharat. As the story unfolds:

““Ram understood his stepmother, Kaikeyi. She had her share of frustrations. She'd been the brightest child in her family. Unfortunately, her brilliance did not make her father proud. Quite the contrary, Ashwapati was unhappy that Kaikeyi outshone his son, Yudhaajit. It appalled Ram that society did not value capable women. And now, the intelligent yet frustrated Kaikeyi sought vicarious recognition through Bharat, her son. She aimed to realise her ambitions through him. (SOI, 71-72)””

Amish justifies that it is not inherently wrong for a mother to seek to fulfil her aspirations through her son, as it aligns with the prevalent cultural expectation in India where fathers often plan for their sons' futures. While the decision to request Ram's exile may be seen as controversial, there is no fault in a mother considering the future well-being of her son. Kaikeyi's actions stem from a desire to shield her son from the hardships she herself has endured in life. She is determined to secure a prosperous future for Bharat, ensuring that he does not encounter the same trials and tribulations she faced. As Manthara speaks of her:

““Oh, I like Ram,’ said Manthara dismissively. _I just like profits more. It'll be good for business if we back the right horse. This is not about choosing between Ram and Bharat, but Kaushalya and Kaikeyi. And, rest assured, Kaikeyi will win. That is a certainty. Ram may well be capable, but he does not have the ability to take on Kaikeyi. (SOI, 113)””

When Manthara approaches Kaikeyi to talk about her Daughter's gang rape case and want justice for her. Because the main victim of the case Dhenuka is a juvenile and could not be punished according to the laws of Ram. Ram is the chief of police force in Ayodhya. But Kaikeyi poses the unique status in Ayodhya who does not care about Ram and his established social norms. She consoles Manthara, He will suffer, ““promised Kaikeyi. _Roshni will be avenged. That is the word of the queen of Ayodhya.!”” (SOI, 155)

Kaikeyi manipulates her son Bharat into seeking revenge for Roshni's death, employing her cunning and skill to circumvent Ram's laws. Despite the challenge of opposing his revered brother Ram, Bharat finds himself compelled to act by Kaikeyi's persuasion. When Bharat questions her motives, Kaikeyi cleverly presents her desire for justice for Roshni as the primary motive. She underscores Roshni's noble status, appealing to Bharat's sense of righteousness

and duty. Kaikeyi's ability to manipulate Bharat showcases her strategic acumen and calculated approach to achieving her goals, even at the expense of familial harmony ““Bharat looked at Kaikeyi quizzically. ‘Why are you so interested in this, Maa?’ ‘I just want justice for our Roshni.’ ‘Really?’ ‘She was a noblewoman, Bharat. Your rakhi-sister was raped by a bloody villager,’ Kaikeyi drove the point home” (156).” Kaikeyi skillfully manipulates Bharat, employing tricks to convince him and meticulously planning her actions, displaying adeptness in persuasion and strategy:

““Kaikeyi pulled out a piece of bloodied white cloth from the folds of her angvastram; it was from the one that had been used to cover Roshni’s brutalised body. ‘Help her get justice.’ Bharat took the cloth gently from his mother, gazed at it and then at his rakhi. He closed his eyes as a tear slid down his cheek.”” (SOI, 159)

Kaikeyi emerges as a formidable and commanding figure in Amish's rendition, capable of instilling fear even in the heart of a king who once held dominion over India. When Ram is forced into a fourteen-year exile due to his employment of the "daivi-astra" in battle, Bharat assumes the responsibility of governing the nation in his absence. However, Dashrath reveals to Ram that it will not be Bharat, but rather Kaikeyi who will wield true power during this time. He warns Ram that Kaikeyi may plot his demise during his exile, showcasing her influence over both her son and the kingdom.

Furthermore, even Raavan, the renowned king of Lanka, acknowledges Kaikeyi's bravery and prowess. Following the war's conclusion, Raavan speaks to his brother Kumbhakaran about the remarkable qualities possessed by Queen Kaikeyi, demonstrating her ability to command respect and admiration from even the most formidable adversaries:

““So you think the bravery of Queen Kaikeyi has actually helped us.’ ‘She wasn’t trying to help us; she was only trying to save her husband. But she is a brave woman. And I have no doubt she will be treated poorly by her ungrateful subjects. They don’t know how to honour their heroes.’”” (EOA, 229)

Amish's portrayal of Kaikeyi transcends mere characterization; she becomes a symbol, embodying both beauty and intellect. Her captivating presence enchants readers, while her formidable strength and power leave a lasting impression. Kaikeyi is not just a woman; she is a multifaceted individual—a skilled warrior, a shrewd politician, a devoted wife, a regal queen, and a loving mother. Despite her complexity, she is often unfairly depicted as a villain in the narrative.

In Indian mythology, Kaikeyi's role extends beyond being a mere antagonist. She accompanies Bharat in an attempt to persuade Ram to return from exile, but Ram, bound by his principles (Pran jaye par vachan na jaye), chooses to honor his word and remains in exile. Ram's refusal is not a rejection of Kaikeyi, but rather a demonstration of his commitment to truth and duty. Thus, Kaikeyi's character is one of depth and nuance, far beyond the simplistic portrayal of a villainess.

In nutshell, Kaikeyi embodies the essence of a postmodern woman, fighting like a soldier and demonstrating the sharpness of a politician. She is the dominant wife of King Dashrath, steadfastly standing by him during life's challenging times. Passionate and blessed with strong

willpower, Kaikeyi is often misrepresented in Indian folklore. The myth that portrays her as naive is nothing more than a conspiracy against a powerful woman. Her actions, which have made her a victim of male domination, cannot be justified on ethical grounds. She acted solely for her son's future, a sentiment any mother would share. Her apology to Ram upon his return from 14 years of exile reveals her true nature as a woman with a pure heart.

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