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**EXPLORING THE ECOFEMINIST AGENCY IN KAVITA KANÉ'S SARASVATI'S  
GIFT**

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**Abstract**

*Anthropocentric activities of the last two centuries have threatened environmental sustainability and ecological balance on Earth. Literature has always been a ready reckoner and cautioner of crisis through innovative and thought-provoking works. Indian mythological fiction helps twenty-first-century readers to understand the problems of the modern world and its relevance in the past. Kavita Kané's Sarasvati's Gift expounds the concept of Prakṛti, the feminine identity assigned to Nature in the Indian context, to weave a strong voice against human exploitation of Nature. The protagonist goddess Sarasvati is a staunch eco-feminist, assertive and bold who does not spare humiliators. By connecting the disappearance of the river Sarasvati to the myth of the goddess's wrath at humanity, Kané weaves a deep moral into her story that stands as a warning against the destructive human activities that disturb the ecological balance. This paper*

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*aims to study Sarasvati's Gift from Vandana Shiva's proposition on eco-feminism where goddess Sarasvati stands as an advocate for Nature against all odds.*

**Keywords:** Eco-feminism, Kavita Kané, Sarasvati's Gift, Vandana Shiva, anthropocentric activities, Prakṛti, the disappearance of rivers

### **Introduction**

Among the various movements for human rights in history, feminism emerged as a movement for, about and by women, and their roles in society. Ontologically, women are associated with Nature as they both perform creation, protection and sustenance. When this interrelatedness is analysed it is seen that patriarchy(man) has been abusing both of them(Plumwood 21). Fiction serves as an important tool for various writers to address these problems. Thus, this paper attempts an ecofeminist reading of Kavita Kané's Sarasvati's Gift using Vandana Shiva's exposition of disappearing rivers in the Anthropocene.

River Saraswathi is one of the many rivers that has disappeared from the face of this earth. The river also has deep mythological significance in Indian mythology. Kané weaves an intrinsic connection between the goddess Sarasvati, the co-creator of the world with Lord Brahma and her manifestation as a river that flows down to earth carrying the bountiful supreme knowledge, Vadavagni, to be given to humanity. As Vandana Shiva argues, multifarious human activities aimed at development and growth have destroyed many natural rivers; Saraswathi being one of them(170). Hence, this paper aims to view goddess Saraswathi, the Prakṛti or physical manifestation of the Purusha principle, as a powerful and assertive being, intolerant towards exploitation, who disappears from the earth's surface at her own will.

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### **Indian Mythological Fiction**

The retelling of myths is an age-old tradition. Indian mythology draws its sources from the mythological narratives of Hinduism, a religion primarily based in India. A decisive surge in recreating Indian Mythology as a fictional narrative in the last decade has contributed immensely to contemporary Indian Writing in English. These books are fictitious and deal with the retellings of the original Indian epics through different lenses relevant to contemporary times. Some of the prominent Indian mythological fiction writers of the twenty-first century are Devdutt Patnaik, Ashwin Sanghi, Kavita Kané, Sai Swaroopa Iyer and Amish Tripathy. Their narratives tend to be very simple and understandable to contemporary readers. These texts are also used to address contemporary problems by various writers.

Kavita Kané was born in Mumbai, India. She is an author and a journalist. She has worked in media houses like Daily News and Analysis and The Times of India. After gaining success in her debut novel, Karna's Wife (2013), she turned to full-time writing fiction. She revisits episodes from Indian mythology to give voice to the many women who have been relegated to anonymity while they deserve a potential deal of recognition in the legend. Her books such as Sita's Sister (2014), Menaka's Choice (2015), Lanka's Princess(2016), The Fisher Queen's Dynasty(2017), Ahalya'sAwakening(2019)and Sarsavati's Gift(2021)have gained worldwide appreciation. Her latest novel Tara's Truce was released on 05th December 2023.

Kané has used feminism as a tool to give expression, power, and status to less-known women characters in the Indian epics. In Sarasvati's Gift, Kané focuses on Goddess Sarasvati, traditionally, the bestower of knowledge, art and music as a staunch feminist and a strong individual. Here, Goddess Sarasvati is the myth breaker and never lets patriarchy oppress her. This novel centres around the protagonist Sarasvati who breaks all stereotypes and superstitions that control the sphere of the gods. The novel allows a wide scope of analysis from various perspectives such as gender, culture, mythology, environment and many more.

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### **Literature Review**

An intense search for existing research on Sarasvati's Gift revealed that apart from the general book reviews on literary and non-literary print media, there is only one research article published which is "Goddess Sarasvati as a Post-Feminist in Kavita Kané's Sarasvati's Gift" by S. N. Vidhyarthini. She talks about the characteristics of Goddess Sarasvati as a post-feminist. Sarasvati is depicted as an individual against oppressive societal norms, questioning her role in society, and advocating against stereotypical views of men and women. She even questions Lord Brahma as a male benefactor in her life. Goddess Sarasvati advocates against discrimination and differences that exist in a patriarchal society. Thus, she descends to set mankind free from oppressive and prejudiced norms.

While Sarasvati's Gift has the potential for valuable research from diverse perspectives, this paper attempts to look at eco-feminist echoes in the novel as the goddess assumes the form of a river, flows onto the earth's surface but disappears due to exploitation by humans.

### **Method**

This paper adopts Textual Analysis as a research method which involves close reading of the text without any presuppositions. Gabriel Griffin says that this method is understanding the process of interpretation of the relation between the reader and the text. He adds that textual analysis starts from the very first reading(166). This method has given the space to interpret different aspects of the novel and examine the text's function, structure, and substance.

### **Methodology**

In her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* published in 1974, the French feminist, Françoise d'Eaubonne, used the term 'ecofeminism' for the first time to denote feminist efforts and practices towards the environment. She also drew parallels between the patriarchal oppression of

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women and the destruction of nature as the cause of imbalance and inequality in society. The term has caught up relevance across the globe, including India, within a century. Many intellectuals turned environmental activists framed theories and concepts to support their arguments on various facets of environmental concerns.

Vandana Shiva is an Indian scholar, environmental activist and leader of the anti-globalisation movement. She is also one of the most celebrated eco-feminists in India and is often referred to as the “Gandhi of Grain”. Vandana Shiva’s first book, *Staying Alive*(1988), helped to change perceptions of Third World women. In this book, she argues how women and nature are closely related to each other, and that oppression of one can cause the destruction of another. In the sixth chapter titled “Women and Vanishing Rivers”, she argues that women are burdened due to the drying of rivers. She gives a statistical study of states in India like Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. She argues that women-based agriculture would be more advanced. Though written more than three decades ago, her ideas are relevant in the rampant economic, social and national development. Her books discuss the deep connection between the Prakṛti and Shakti.

This paper aims to examine Kavita Kané's *Sarasvati's Gift* through the lens of Ecofeminism as propounded by Vandana Shiva. It delves deep into the protagonist’s character to understand her unique personality as Brahmani, the co-creator with Brahma, the Prakṛiti or ecological aspect of creation and a woman with feminine potential and authority.

### **Ecofeminist Agency**

India is a country which predominantly believes in gods and goddesses. Femininity is one of the important forms of worship in India “which has its roots deep in ancient history” (Ghoshhajra 404). Plumwood argues that women and nature are usually backgrounded by the patriarchal society which is causing a threat to man’s life on earth (21). Thus, Kané chooses the Indian

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goddess Sarasvati as a character, who advocates ecofeminism and shuns various oppressions done to nature and women. Goddess Sarasvati, consort of Lord Brahma, is the bestower of knowledge, learning, art, and music. The Hindu scriptures hail Saraswati as “the essence of the self” as sara means “essence” and swameans “self” in Sanskrit. She is perceived in three major roles: as river, as Vak (speech), and as goddess” (Bhattacharya n.p.). She is one of the goddess Shakthi's tantra rupas. She grants men success, health, and fortune.

Kané gives the goddess Saraswati a fresh, contemporary perspective. She is depicted as gender assertive, staunch eco-feminist and post-feminist. She refuses to let any kind of patriarchal oppression overpower her. She liberates herself from the bonds, myths, superstitions and ideologies of society. She assumes the form of a river to bestow the boon of knowledge on man. As a river goddess, she stresses the act of saving the environment and women. She wants to establish equality among men and women by trying to solve the problems faced by contemporary women. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva write, “...social problems (patriarchal relations, inequality, alienation, poverty) must be solved together with ecological problems. This interconnectedness of all life on earth, of problems and solutions is one of the main insights of ecofeminism” (416). Goddess Sarasvati stands as this unifying force to solve both ecological and social problems (though in the world of gods) in the novel. Therefore, Kané has recharacterized the goddess Sarasvati, using fiction as a tool to address contemporary problems in the world, encouraging women to voice out the suppression and suffering that they face under patriarchy.

### **Goddess Sarasvati as Prakrti**

Goddess Sarasvati is created from the thoughts of Lord Brahma. He wanted a second manifestation of himself. He wanted his thoughts to materialise as a beautiful woman who would be his partner in the process of Creation as the Shakthi (Kané 3). He could not wait but breathe life into her. He finally created her and thinks, “She was stunning as he had imagined her to be,

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raising from the waves of his thoughts, from the crest of his ocean of desires, a soft spray of stimulation and brilliance, He had done it! He had created his inspiration! Sarasvati! “(Kané 6). Initially, Goddess Sarasvati does not care for his presence. Lord Brahma starts doubting his creation when she behaves disrespectfully. She questions Lord Brahma about her creation, the reason for her creation, and her role. Lord Brahma is baffled and aghast by her conduct. He tells her that she has finally uttered the primordial sound, Om. Then, sarcastically she raises this question to him: “Was it how it all started? With the renunciation of Om, the sacred sound? All of your creation, even me? Was I the last?” (Kané 8). The tone in which Goddess Sarasvati speaks surprises and startles Lord Brahma. She asserts by saying that she would keep asking him questions if he would stand stupefied like that. He did not appreciate this outspokenness in her that came out sometimes as haughtiness. He replies that Sarasvati is the embodiment of one’s ocean of experience (Kané 9). She interrogates, “So “Sarasvati” is a portmanteau—of saras, meaning “pooling water”, and... Am I from vapour?”(Kané 9). These lines reveal that at a later point in time, she would manifest in the form of a river. Her inquisitiveness makes her analyse her existence in many ways. She interrogates her association with water and speech, for which Lord Brahma replies, “You are sara, the essence of knowledge, that is expressed through speech and collected in the vastness of its waters” (Kané 10). She seems to be satisfied with the answer given by Lord Brahma and accepts it. This shows the assertive and questioning nature of goddess Sarasvati. She is always curious about things around her which later helps her to aid Lord Brahma in the process of creation and bestowing of boons. Lord Brahma explains the importance of Creation and their distinction: “You are not me, you are complementary to me,’ he said. ‘If I have the Rajas qualities of passion and action, then you as Sarasvati, have Sattva—the attributes of balance, harmony and creativeness.”(Kané 16). These lines indicate that Lord Brahma has given goddess Sarasvati an equal position in the process of creation.

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Hence, goddess Sarasvati is created as the female counterpart of the Creator himself. She becomes Shatarupa, who is responsible for the creation of this universe. By giving the responsibility of rearing the universe, Lord Brahma had given her an important role to play.

**Ideal woman**

Goddess Sarasvati being the Shatarupa plays many roles. She is concerned about the sustenance of life on earth. She does not tolerate any kind of injustice that is caused to nature, trees, rivers, and women. She is an ideal, responsible woman. She takes up the responsibility to bring down the Fire of Knowledge, Vadavagni, onto earth. Hereby, to bring Fire of Knowledge, she assumes the form of a river. She sustains life on earth by bestowing a boon of knowledge on mankind. She teaches them the right way of living their lives. She preferred no jewels and was a conservative minimalist in terms of speech, action, thoughts, and deeds. This further makes her an ambassador of nature's beauty, untouched by humans. She also exhibits immense compassion for the distraught and desolate as kshama devi but at the same time does not spare those who exploit her benevolent presence as a woman and nature too. Goddess Sarasvati exhibits extreme care and discretion as an eco-warrior as she foresees the dangers of indiscriminate boons given by Lord Brahma that would harm nature's balance. With the help of her jnana shakti, she tries to teach a lesson to the asuras who take advantage of Lord Brahma's boons, thereby protecting nature.

### **Against superstitions of the society**

Goddess Sarasvati is the myth breaker. She broke a lot of stereotypes attached to the female regarding marriage, motherhood, and genteel and naive nature. Goddess Sarasvati frees herself from the shackles of the restrictions laid by society on marriage. She extends her relationship towards Lord Brahma as a friend and as a co-worker(Kané 59). Ecofeminists argue that it is only when a woman exerts her contribution to production and process, that she can claim equality.



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True to this Sarasvati assumes equal power as Brahma in the process of creation. She vehemently puts forth, "Despite man's claims he is superior, in terms of context and acumen, women surpass men" (Kané 246). She demonstrates the role of women and their importance in man's life. In fact, she reprimands goddesses Lakshmi and Parvati as supporters of patriarchy.

Kané, in one of her posts on social media, reveals that she had chosen Sarasvati and Brahma, owing to their minimal presence in mythology as against the other two of the Trimurtis with their consorts. However, the writer finds that the two entities as creators have not received the due followership deserved by them owing to their primary contribution to creation. Hence, Kané decides to centre them in this novel and promote possible socially reformatory thoughts through them.

Goddess Sarasvati breaks the socio-religious stigma of menstrual taboo that prevailed in society since ancient times. Menstruation is an important natural process in a woman's life. But this process which is innate in a woman's body is perceived as a taboo and has a stigma attached to it. But Kané's Sarasvati liberates the natural organic existence of a woman from the cultural burden by turning Vishwamitra's curse into a boon by saying that her waters, which are turned into blood, will be a blessing to women. Thus, her river is the manifestation of the period blood flow of women—not impure, not unclean, not taboo (Kané 260). Today, modern world women are trying to normalise this natural biological process and educate each other of its biological significance.

Contrary to the Goddess Sarasvati described in Hindu religious scriptures, Kané's Sarasvati calls motherhood a woman's choice rather than a mandatory status. Her compassion as a mother and origin of knowledge, wisdom and arts is uncompromised though she denies the need for a child of her own.

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### **Ideal supporter of Lord Brahma**

Goddess Sarasvati is an ideal supporter who helps Lord Brahma in the process of creation and granting of boons. She becomes the equal half of Lord Brahma, thus renamed as Brahmi(Kané 223). Both Lord Brahma and Goddess Sarasvati support, respect and revere each other. Thus, they form a well-grounded and responsible relationship.

In conclusion, all the qualities that goddess Sarsavati possess depict her as an assertive woman, original in her thought. Similarly, as she does not tolerate subjugation of women and their rights, she does not allow man to destroy ecology too. She is the strong protagonist chosen by Kané to teach individualism to contemporary women. Kané is trying to change society's perception towards women and also their nature of being submissive.

### **Manifestation as a River**

Goddess Sarasvati is an embodiment of Prakṛtī.e., the nature principle of creation. She does not tolerate the subjugation of nature and women. Thus, she fights against the destruction of nature and voices against man for his anthropocentric activities. She takes the form of a river to bestow the boon of supreme knowledge(Vadavagni) on humanity. While as a determined feminine entity she seamlessly flows down from heaven into the cupped bosom of Brahma before gushing out free onto the earth, as an eco-lover, she doesn't cause any disturbance to nature. She alters her course along the mountains and forests till she meets and merges with the ocean after accomplishing her task. However, she is pained at this contemporary world, which has outgrown technology and no longer cares about nature and its importance in man's life. This principle of Prakṛti can easily teach man his lesson for his unscrupulous destruction of nature but out of compassion, she suffers all the pain. After all, goddess Sarasvati manifests in the form of a river as a voice of nature who is suffering and tries to bring awareness among men.

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### **The Sarasvati River**

In Hindu mythology that Kané integrates into her novel, Goddess Sarasvati accepts the request to transform into a river to bring the Fire of Knowledge (Vadavagni) to earth as a boon to mankind. This Fire of Knowledge emerged from Lord Shiva and had to be carried by a fluid yet strong force down to the earth to save humankind. This Urn of Fire is the connection between man and the gods. The Vadvagni was so fierce and hot that if it escaped, it would destroy this entire cycle of creation (Kané 68).

Lord Brahma explains the importance of this fire, that it is symbolic of knowledge which helps man to purify, enlighten himself and become a person with higher spiritual knowledge. This fire is a part of the five elements (panchabhutas) of nature. Fire can be both destructive and benevolent. Thereby, using this component (fire of knowledge, Vadavagni) of Prakṛti, man should gain wisdom which can be used to make the earth a better place to live in. Lord Brahma entrusts Sarasvati with this task in the following words:

And then, we will start the process of transformation, when you shall be the water, but the moment the fire is handed to you, another more dangerous process of transformation starts—your eventual evaporation and precipitation as you fall from heaven onto the earth (Kané 93).

After explaining all the possible changes that goddess Sarasvati has to go through, Lord Brahma plans out the route map for goddess Sarasvati. He takes all the careful measures, yet worries about her transformation. Goddess Sarasvati assures him heroically: “It shall all go fine, need I have to keep reassuring? I’m more qualified than anybody else.” (Kané 96). She accepts Lord Brahma's request and comes as a boon to mankind.

### **A Godly Word of Caution**

Goddess Sarasvati is now the river Sarasvati bestowing the blessing of knowledge and good living on mankind. She calls man the “knowledge-hungry beings” (Kané 87). In the novel,

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before bestowing the boon of knowledge on man she takes a promise from him, and also warns him:

If I can bless with waters of life, I can cause destruction too with flooding and perhaps drought,... If you take care of me I shall look after you....I acknowledge respect more than worship...If you worship me, I shall remain a goddess; if you respect me I shall live and flourish. (Kané 103)

She also warns him strongly that Vadavagni “can actually become the Beast of Doom if wisdom is abandoned and Man corrupts the world .... [it will] burst forth as volcanoes from under the oceans, subsequently consuming the land and destroying the universe and the cycle of Creation!”(Kané 115).

### **Plight of the River Sarasvati Due to Destructive Activities**

Even after promising River Goddess, man contaminates her. He built dams, catchments and canals across the river. There is excess usage and wastage of water. Due to this many areas suffer from water shortage. Goddess Sarasvati firmly asks man to stop these destructive activities. Borthakur elucidates that “sound ecosystems are today being damaged beyond the opportunity of rejuvenation”(310). River Sarasvati is one such river which is beyond rejuvenation.

Rivers are considered to be sacred in India. They are the source of many civilizations in this world. Goddess Sarasvati is considered as “River Mahata Varita—meaning “mighty pitcher bringing large water.” She gave this pitcher of “Pure thoughts” to sages and people on earth (Kané 103). Such a mighty river like Sarasvati is destroyed by man, which has led to the drying up of the river. This has been recorded in Indian Scriptures like Rigveda, Manusmriti and Upanishads too. Vandana Shiva argues that drying up rivers is rather man-made than natural activity. She adds that man by building dams and catchments aims for economic growth, not thinking about the damage he is causing to the river. Since rivers are drying up, it is becoming a burden for women as they have to walk longer to fetch water from another source (170). Shiva

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writes: “The illusion of abundance created by dams has been created by ignoring the abundance provided by nature” (175). It is seen that man, out of sheer ignorance and disrespect towards rivers, built dams across it. When dams are built across the river, it hinders the natural cycle of the river i.e. the process of evaporation and precipitation. Water in a river can only survive until it is used within its limits. Even though dams store excess water as reservoirs, this leads to water stagnation which in turn causes the death of aquatic creatures. The ever-growing need for space in the urban sector owing to the increase in population and migration has also led to the disappearance of many lakes and rivulets. River water is being extracted in excess to cater to the demands of industries and the IT sector causing the gradual death of rivers. Hence, this way man is destroying these sacred water bodies. It is man’s greed for the economisation of natural resources that has caused the extinction of water bodies. Pramod K Nayar mentions in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism* that Ecofeminists argue that man considers nature (usually treated as feminine) as subordinate to him and hence, available for use to fulfil his needs, just as a woman (341). Thus, River Goddess Sarasvati, as an ecofeminist, teaches man a lesson for all the destruction he has done to her. She could no longer bear his anthropocentric activities. So she decides to go underground and become an invisible river.

As an eco-feminist, goddess Sarasvati is not only angry at man for destroying rivers, but she also expresses her plight when trees are cut down. Goddess Sarasvati is the river which flows from the Plaksha Tree. In Skanda Purana, it is mentioned that the river Sarasvati originates from the water pot of Lord Brahma which flows from the Plaksha tree in the Himalayas. This shows that trees provide knowledge. They are an important part of ecology which helps in the sustenance of life by nurturing and giving food and shade to living beings. Meanwhile, man has started cutting down trees to build infrastructures, buildings and skyscrapers. Goddess Sarasvati is enraged that man gained knowledge from trees to destroy them.

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Goddess Sarsavati is the unifier of mankind and nature. She is called ‘Chikitushi’. She is mentioned by Shiva that she shall always protect this sacred bond between man and nature (Kané 220). She comes down to unite man with nature and purify him through vak– words and speech – “knowledge that purifies” whose flow refines the essence, the self of a person” (Kané 146-147). Unfortunately, she sees that man does not cooperate with her. Instead, he starts using and abusing components of prakṛti for his gain. Goddess Sarasvati as an eco-warrior decides to leave this earth, letting man suffer the consequences of his actions. With these lines she vanishes, “I can't stay any longer, I have no waters left, nothing to give, and hence I shall disappear underground and continue my glorious flow beneath the surface”(Kané xvi).

### **Punishment- Retrieval of Boon**

Goddess Sarsvati being a staunch eco-feminist, doesn't agree to any matter that lowered her self-esteem. The moment she realises that humans including the enlightened rishis and common man alike did not value her presence, she decides to leave the earth with a firm conviction. She announces, “Today I shall return to the Heavens, never to come back...” (Kané ix). Goddess Sarasvati bestowed man with knowledge with no extraordinary expectation from him. She expresses her pain and agony. She tells Rishis that she had promoted freedom of thought and creativity among men, but man has used that freedom to damage, ruin and finally kill nature and her waters. She is filled with hatred and contempt towards man and his behaviour. She does not heed the prayerful requests of the rishis but retracts the boon, taking away knowledge that she had bestowed on man.

### **Impact of Curse on Mankind**

Ever since goddess Sarasvati abandoned man and took away the highest wisdom, he has been turning barbaric day by day. In Kané’s mythological fiction, the goddess Sarasvati retrieves her

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waters; she takes back the boon of knowledge and wisdom from man. Rishi pleads and makes many promises to her. She does not hope that he will keep his promises. Thus, river Sarasvati dries up. Rishi is left devastated. He takes a last glimpse of the dried river in remorse.

In reality, the place where Sarasvati dried has become an arid land. This was the cause of the decline of ancient Indian Civilisation. The outcome of taking away wisdom from man is that he is violating ecological laws, and destroying water bodies, trees, and land. Anthropocentric activities have led to drought, water scarcity, and drying up of water bodies. There is a lack of love between man and nature, man and man, man and animals. He has taken the wrong pathways like corruption, robbery, bribery, and murder. He has lost his sense of wisdom. Thus, it is evident if feminine principles i.e. women and nature are not respected and revered, there cannot be any peace and harmony.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, goddess Sarasvati indeed is an eco-feminist who does not tolerate any mishandling of her waters as well as her integrity. She does not let patriarchy overpower her in any way. She had punished both Lord Brahma and Man for disrespecting her. Thus, goddess Sarasvati does not let herself be a victim of patriarchy and societal norms, and in the form of a river, to the destructive activities of man. By turning away from both Lord Brahma and Man, she teaches them her importance in their lives. Hence, she stands out as an eco-feminist who strongly argues that women and nature have an important role to play in a man's life.

Thereby, by characterising goddess Sarasvati, Kané has used fiction as a tool to address many contemporary issues. Kané has given voice to ecology which further shouts out to human beings to stop their activities that harm nature. Now, human beings should pay heed to these voices of ecology. Let us all try our best to cure these wounds suffered by this feminine principle,

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Prakṛtiby replanting trees, saving water, and also not subjugating women. Hence, wherever women will be respected and revered, ecology will stand for the goodwill of man.

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