Dear Reader,

The seeds of Kaikeyi were planted seventeen years ago in a discussion between my mother and my grandmother. Each summer, my grandmother would tell my sister and me stories of mythic heroes from ancient India, of Hindu gods and goddesses, and of great battles between good and evil.

Personally, I loved hearing stories from the Ramayana, one of the most famous Indian epics. I begged my grandmother to narrate the adventures of the heroic prince Rama, his kidnapped wife Sita, and the demon king Ravana. On one such occasion, my mother overheard my grandmother telling of how Rama was exiled by his wicked, jealous stepmother, and she stepped in with a different interpretation: from her perspective, the Ramayana couldn't have happened without the stepmother. So how evil could she truly be? This minor disagreement lodged in my brain. I thought about it for years, periodically hoping someone would write the stepmother’s story—Kaikeyi’s story. Eventually I decided to write it myself.

The more I researched the Ramayana, the more fascinated I became. In most versions of the epic, Kaikeyi is described as a courageous warrior and excellent queen, a woman who loves Rama as her own son. Slowly, Kaikeyi became not just about the event which made her infamous—her choice to exile Rama—but about exploring the full and rich life she led before tearing her family apart. In order to do her justice, I also delved into the stories of the other women who populate the edges of the Ramayana, seeking to give voice to their inner lives.

So while you’ll meet many familiar characters in this story, don’t expect a tale exactly like the original epic. After all, Kaikeyi isn’t about the legendary prince... it’s about the wicked stepmother.

Thank you for reading,

Vaishnavi Patel
1. Kaikeyi is a reimagining of the Indian epic the Ramayana. Were you familiar with the original story before reading? If so, how did that impact your response to Kaikeyi’s character and journey in this book? If not, did Kaikeyi spark your interest in learning more about the Ramayana?

2. In the original epic, Kaikeyi is often considered a villainous character. Is it clear why she’s been cast as the wrongdoer in this version of the story? Is she to blame for the way certain tragic events unfold?

3. How did Kaikeyi’s relationship with the gods impact her relationship with her son Rama? Was she correct in her judgment of what was best for the kingdom and in the actions she took to try to stay the course?

4. While Kaikeyi has many strong and loving relationships, she does not experience romantic love or sexual attraction in the story. Does this impact Kaikeyi’s decisions, and the way she views the decisions of others around her, in any way?

5. Kaikeyi’s access to the Binding Plane is more personal—and potentially more manipulative—than many other forms of power in this book. What does Kaikeyi’s use of this power say about her? About other characters who wield similar abilities?

6. Kaikeyi is constantly aware of the power imbalances between women and men but doesn’t often question the imbalances where she may be in command (for example, the imbalance between nobility and commoners).

Discussion Questions

What does this say about Kaikeyi’s character? Does it put any of her actions in a new light?

7. Every character in Kaikeyi has their own view on the role of women in society—and in fact, some of the most powerful men are the most egalitarian. And yet the society itself remains divided by rigid gender rules. Why might this be?

8. One recurring theme throughout this book is the spread of patriarchy. What are the different ways in which patriarchal ideals are shared and adopted in the story?

9. The gods in the story seem to have very different concerns and views from those humanity believes them to have. What does this difference say about humanity?

10. The book portrays several different types of female friendships and relationships—among mothers and daughters, friends, and sister-wives. Do these ring true to the times of the book? How do they subvert or conform to stereotypes about women?

11. How does the novel comment on the role of women in mythology and folklore? Do you think asking “what if” about the characters who exist in the margins is a useful means by which to interrogate and expand our understanding of how stories impact and shape our lives (and vice versa)?

12. Were you satisfied with the way Kaikeyi’s story ended?
**Q&A WITH VAISHNAVI PATEL**

*Kaikeyi* was inspired by the *Ramayana*. Can you tell readers unfamiliar with the *Ramayana* a little of what it’s about?

The *Ramayana* is an ancient epic. It tells the story of Rama, who is the Hindu god Vishnu reincarnated as the prince of a great kingdom. Just as he is about to be crowned king, Rama is banished from his home by his stepmother and sets off on a fourteen-year exile, accompanied by his brother Lakshmana and his wife, Sita. From there, the *Ramayana* follows the kidnapping of Sita by a demon king, Ravana, and the war Rama wages to save her. Ultimately, he defeats Ravana in a great battle and returns to his kingdom, triumphant, to take his place on the throne.

In the epic, Kaikeyi has a small role. She’s the stepmother who exiles Rama, sparking the entire journey that follows.

How does *Kaikeyi* reimagine the events of the epic?

There are three major plot points in the *Ramayana* that concern Kaikeyi: First, upon her marriage to Dasharath, Dasharath promises her father that Kaikeyi’s son will become king. After her marriage, she saves her husband’s life in battle and is granted two boons by him. And many years later, she exiles Rama using those same boons so that her own son will be king.

All of these plot points appear in *Kaikeyi*, but the novel takes these and expands her story, filling in the gaps and giving Kaikeyi an inner life—motivations and desires and relationships—so we can understand why she takes the extreme actions that she does. There are also events in the novel that are inspired by stories from the *Ramayana* but modified for *Kaikeyi*—for example, the story of Ahalya is in both the *Ramayana* and *Kaikeyi*, but it plays a very different role in my novel.

Of course, there are some plot elements that are changed. *Kaikeyi* ends before Sita’s kidnapping, so it doesn’t cover much of what would usually be considered the major parts of the *Ramayana*. But I have tried to include important elements from later in the *Ramayana* in *Kaikeyi*, either by reference or by using the characters in other roles, so I hope the story will still be satisfying to all readers!

Is *Kaikeyi* a stand-alone novel or the first book in a series?

*Kaikeyi* is a standalone. I wanted to tell Kaikeyi’s story from childhood until her major actions in the *Ramayana*. The *Ramayana* itself is a sprawling epic with thousands and thousands of verses, and I didn’t want to attempt to retread its ground. By focusing on one person and one
Q & A

specific set of events within that person’s life, I’ve kept Kaikeyi more cabined. I almost think of it as hearkening back to oral tradition, where you might hear a tale that fits into a larger epic tapestry but is also complete in itself.

Is there anything that people interested in Kaikeyi should know about the story or the character?

This answer isn’t necessarily for every single reader. But for South Asian or Hindu readers who are doubtful about picking up this book because of who it focuses on, I want to reassure you that I love the original Ramayana and am not trying to disrespect it. While Kaikeyi feels different from the Ramayana, the critiques in it are meant to make us think about what messages these religious stories are sending so that we can more consciously consume these myths. Kaikeyi comes from a place of love for this story and for my culture.

What writers and stories do you think had a big influence on Kaikeyi (in addition to the Ramayana)?

I was influenced by all of the Hindu myths I grew up with, because that cultural environment shaped my approach to this story. I read all the Amar Chitra Katha comics (a series that offers abridged versions of mythic tales and folklore) as a kid, and I definitely watched some animated Ramayana shows, so I’m sure that’s swimming around in my subconscious. Adaptations of the Ramayana in live and animated screen media are almost ubiquitous in India!

Also, I have to give thanks to the modern fantasy authors Roshani Chokshi and Tasha Suri, who inspired me to write unapologetically South Asian stories and proved that there was a desire and market for that.

People who’ve read Kaikeyi have compared it to Madeline Miller’s Circe, a retelling of the Odyssey; Jennifer Saint’s Ariadne, which reworks the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur; and Genevieve Gornichec’s The Witch’s Heart, a reimagining of the life of Angrboda from Norse mythology.

If someone enjoys Kaikeyi, what other retellings or adaptations of myths would you recommend?

First, I love all three of these books and I’m still so excited that Kaikeyi is being compared to them! Kaikeyi has similarities to these novels in that they all take a mythic woman who has not always been looked upon kindly and retell the story from her perspective. If I can be half the writer that any of those authors are, then I’ll have succeeded with Kaikeyi.

But I do also think that Kaikeyi is different from other popular retellings in some ways, because it is reinterpreting a story from a religion that’s still very widely practiced and has great modern weight. The Ramayana is an important part of Hinduism, so Kaikeyi is set in what many people believe to be our past. As a Hindu, I’m not sure that I can definitively say that these events occurred—certainly I don’t think they happened exactly the way they are told in the verses of the Ramayana—but I do think the stories are based at least in part on historical figures and kingdoms. And the critiques that the book touches on are
grounded in present-day interpretation and belief and trying to navigate current religious waters.

The retellings discussed above are all excellent for people who want to read adaptations. Another retelling I’m excited about is Maya Deane’s *Wrath Goddess Sing*, which features Achilles as a trans woman and covers events from the *Iliad*. If you enjoyed *Kaikeyi*, I think *Wrath Goddess Sing*’s exploration of gender and friendships could be appealing. For people who enjoyed *Kaikeyi*’s setting or cultural critique, I also want to mention Tanvi Berwah’s *Monsters Born and Made*, a South Asian–inspired fantasy (not a retelling). It not only is an amazing story but also features really smart commentary on class and caste, and I highly recommend it!

For further reading on the *Ramayana*, Vaishnavi recommends:

**C. Rajagopalachari’s Translated and Abridged *Ramayana* (1957).**
There are many translations of the *Ramayana*, but this particular translation, which has sold over one million copies and was written by a great Indian statesman, is a very popular and abridged version, shortening the epic into a little under 500 pages. If you wish to read the *Ramayana*, I’d recommend this as an entry point!

Perhaps the seminal text on the many tellings of the *Ramayana*. If you are looking for an overview of the different traditions of the epic, what they mean, and examples of the variations between them, start here!

**Many *Ramayanas*: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia, (ed. Paula Richman, 1991).**
I highly recommend this collection as a whole. Each essay sheds light on a different facet of the many retellings of the *Ramayana*. Some focus on a specific character or theme that appears across many of the iterations, while others focus on a single telling and how it is in conversation with the larger canon. In particular I recommend in Velchuru Narayana Rao’s essay, *A Ramayana of Their Own: Women’s Oral Tradition in Telugu*. If you enjoyed *Kaikeyi*, I think *Wrath Goddess Sing*’s exploration of gender and friendships could be appealing. For people who enjoyed *Kaikeyi*’s setting or cultural critique, I also want to mention Tanvi Berwah’s *Monsters Born and Made*, a South Asian–inspired fantasy (not a retelling). It not only is an amazing story but also features really smart commentary on class and caste, and I highly recommend it!

**The *Ramayanas Revisited* (ed. Mandakranta Bose, 2004).**
This is another wonderful collection of essays. Of particular use to me was Sally J. Sutherland Goldman’s essay, *Gender, Space, and Narrative Structures* in Vālmki’s *Ramayana*, which grappled with how femininity was presented both as a model and as a threat within the text.

**Volga’s The Liberation of Sita (2016).**
The Liberation of Sita is one form of a *Ramayana* retelling, told from the perspective of Sita following her exile by Rama at the end of the epic. Through conversations with four other women of the *Ramayana* (some who you may recognize from *Kaikeyi!*), the book explores how patriarchy impacts us all.

**Rashmi Luthra’s Clearing Sacred Ground: Women-Centered Interpretations of the Indian Epics in Feminist Formations (2014).**
There is a lot of wonderful scholarship out there about Sita, feminism, and the *Ramayana*. What I appreciated about this essay was how it cut across issues of caste and class as well, to talk about how women from a variety of backgrounds have claimed aspects of the *Ramayana* and Sita’s stories for themselves.
WHICH WOMAN OF KAIKEYI ARE YOU?

KAIKEYI:
Princess of Kekaya, Queen of Kosala, Mother of Bharata

IN THE RAMAYANA:
Kaikeyi is a respected queen who wins two boons from her husband, Dasharath, after saving his life in battle. Many years later, just as Rama (Dasharath’s son by Queen Kaushalya) is about to take the throne, Kaikeyi is manipulated by her maidservant Manthara to use those boons to exile Rama and put her own son on the throne. Today she is widely viewed as a villainous figure.

Personality Type: INTJ (The Architect)
Theme Song: “mad woman” by Taylor Swift
Favorite Food: Any and all sweets except kheer
Favorite Color: Indigo
Priorities: Making a better world for women and protecting her family

MANTHARA:
Maidservant to Queen Kaikeyi

IN THE RAMAYANA:
Manthara is Kaikeyi’s servant and former nursemaid, who accompanies her throughout her life. When she learns of Rama’s impending coronation, she poisons Kaikeyi’s mind against Rama. She convinces Kaikeyi to use her boons to exile Rama and make Kaikeyi’s birth son (Bharata) king. She too is also widely considered a villain and a force of corruption.

Personality Type: ISFJ (The Defender)
Theme Song: “Vienna” by Billy Joel
Favorite Food: Mangoes
Favorite Color: Maroon
Priorities: Keeping Kaikeyi out of trouble
KAUSHALYA:
Queen of Kosala, Mother of Rama

IN THE RAMAYANA:
Kaushalya is the first wife of Dasharath. She gives birth to Rama, who is a reincarnation of Lord Vishnu, after eating divine kheer during a great sacrifice intended to bless the kingdom with heirs.

Personality Type:
ESTJ (The Executive)

Theme Song:
“Respect” by Aretha Franklin

Favorite Food:
Mutton curry

Favorite Color:
Saffron

Priorities:
Managing the royal household, raising her son

SUMITRA:
Queen of Kosala, Mother of Shatrugna and Lakshmana

IN THE RAMAYANA:
Little is said about Sumitra in the Ramayana. She is the third wife of Dasharath and is given an extra portion of kheer during the sacrifice, leading to the birth of her twins.

Personality Type:
INFP (The Mediator)

Theme Song:
“Yeh Bandhan Toh” from the film Karan Arjun

Favorite Food:
Kheer

Favorite Color:
Mint green

Priorities:
Keeping the peace, doting on her sons
WHICH WOMAN OF KAIKEYI ARE YOU?

SITA:
Princess of Videha, Wife of Rama

IN THE RAMAYANA:
Sita is one of the epic’s central figures. She is kidnapped by the rakshasa Ravana, who (in most accounts) wishes to force Sita to be his wife. Rama sets off to rescue her, culminating in an epic battle. Following Rama’s victory, doubts about Sita’s purity lead to her being exiled to a forest, where she raises her twin sons.

Personality Type:
ENFJ (The Protagonist)

Favorite Food:
Karela (bitter melon)

Favorite Color:
Silver

Priorities:
Discovering her destiny

KEKAYA:
Former Queen of Kekaya, Mother of Kaikeyi

IN THE RAMAYANA:
Almost nothing is known of Kaikeyi’s mother Kekaya—except that she was exiled by her husband over a reason involving his boon.

Personality Type:
ISTJ (The Logician)

Favorite Food:
Unknown

Favorite Color:
Peacock blue

Priorities:
Survival
Vaishnavi Patel is a law student focusing on constitutional law and civil rights. She likes to write at the intersection of Indian myth, feminism, and anti-colonialism. Her short stories can be found in The Dark and 87 Bedford’s Historic Fantasy Anthology, along with a forthcoming story in Helios Quarterly. Vaishnavi grew up in and around Chicago and, in her spare time, enjoys activities that are almost stereotypically Midwestern: knitting, ice-skating, drinking hot chocolate, and making hotdish.

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