

# RETELLING EPICS IN FEMININE PERSPECTIVE: AN EMERGING TREND IN REFERENCE WITH KAVITA KANE: KARNA'S WIFE: THE OUTCAST'S QUEEN

## Abstract

Ramayana and Mahabharata are the two great pillars of Indian epics. Literature in general has gone through various movements right from the age of its origin. Though Ramayana and Mahabharata have been told in various versions in the different regions of the country, the recent trend is the retelling of the epics in a feminine perspective. Earlier women were considered as merely characters in the literature, they were not allowed to express their true feelings and they had no identity of their own. After many reformist movements new trends in literature emerged namely historicism, magical realism, Afro futurism and so on. One among them is exploring mythical epics from a feminine view. This paper aims to analyse the female characters in the novel and their quest for identity particularly through the character of Uruvi, a Pukeya princess who is married to a Sutaputra, Karna in the novel *Karna's Wife – The Outcasts' Queen* by Kavita Kane.

**Keywords:** Myth, Identity, caste, patriarchy and love.

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Kavita Kane's novel *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* retells the story of the Hindu religious epic, Mahabharata from the perspective of Uruvi and her relationship with her enigmatic husband Karna, The King of Anga. The social theme of Mahabharata often revolves around war, politics, sacrifices and morality but feminine theme existed since the birth of mythology but was recognized only later. This paper tends to analyse the female characters in the novel who challenges the norms of patriarchal society, since patriarchy has uprooted in Indian culture. In the earlier days female protagonists in literature were unacknowledged, despite their valour. Writers like Kavita Kane started approaching literature from a feminine perspective in search of female identity against the gender division during the pre-historic period of India.

Kavita Kane is one of the renowned women writers who reinterprets mythological texts into novels by selecting women as protagonists, by means of feministic approach. Kane's novels are revisioning epics which challenges the patriarchal perspectives and retold the stories in the voices of women who were disregarded those days. In all her novels she elevated marginalized women whose stories remain unsung. She questioned identity, race, caste, patriarchy, gender inequality of the marginalized women and retells their stories in her novels. Kane's *Karna's Wife* is merely a feminist translation as the whole novel is illustrated by Uruvi, the second wife of Karna being a noticeable character in Mahabharata. The novel is just not the record of her own life yet it gives her interpretations of many occurrences wherein she arouses to be a strong character throughout. Uruvi is the representation of all new women who go through new transformations in their lives.

The Character of Uruvi, portrayed as an independent woman who celebrates her womanhood throughout her life. The title "**outcast**" clearly pictures Uruvi as an outcast along with Karna though she is from a "**Kshatriya**" origin. Her choice of marrying a man who is not a Kshatriya turned her life upside down. She faces humiliation for being married to a man of lower caste. But none of this humiliation moved Uruvi's love for Karna. Though the society never applauded her marriage, she states that Karna isn't, "*the wrong man, the wronged man, A good man trapped in a bad situation*" (18). She questions prevalence of caste and biasness of the society. She even inquires Bhishma about his biasness towards Karna only because he is a son of a Charioteer and favouring Arjun just because he is a prince. "*Arjuna has won because of his noble birth not because of his merits*" (67). When everyone taunts Karna and questions his identity to participate in the royal game of swayamwar, Uruvi is the one who trust Karna is a man of courage and his proficiency, all the more she is sole motive behind Karna's participation in the royal swayamwar. She ensures that Karna is invited so that she could make use of his arrival. Uruvi states that how women were conditioned to caste consciousness and gender discrimination as the other women characters in the novel consider her marriage as ignoble. She defends her marriage by stating that the other princesses like Draupadi, Kunti, etc. were merely considered as inanimate objects like crowns which was won out of competition. Even Kunti, an epitome of sacrifice, an adorable woman and a victim of patriarchy questions Uruvi's decision to marry Karna. Being another mother to Uruvi she tries her best explaining the difficulties of marrying a "sutaputra". She quotes, "*You will be the outsider in their home, can you ever live happily with him?*" (28). Unfortunately, Uruvi did not get the same affection of her family in her husband's home.

Kane portrays Uruvi as a courageous woman who stands by Karna for his success. She appraises Karna as her hero. As feminine theory focuses on women's liberation in every aspect, she is a firm decision maker who questions wrong societal norms and convinces her father that her choice of groom is perfect. He warns Uruvi that Karna's loyalty towards Duryodhana will bring about his downfall even though he is a man of valour, generosity and fortitude. She is aware of the outcome of her decision and ready to accept it. This illustrates Uruvi's unconditional love for Karna and her daring courage to admit it. Uruvi exposes the hegemonic societal structure of the Indian society by describing how others refuse her choice of marriage. Eventually all the women characters in the novel were subjugated to patriarchy directly or indirectly. They were pressurised under the nobility of societal norms as they could not freely express their wishes and desires. For instance, Kunti respects Uruvi's decision as she lacks the courage to decide her own life earlier. She is afraid that the society will slander her for the birth of Karna, being so called "illegitimate child". Disheartened Kunti abandoned Karna for the sake of her dignity for which she is regretful for the rest of her life. She blessed Uruvi as follows: "*May God give you the strength to lead the life you have chosen...the strength I lacked*" (29). Kane portrays Uruvi as a courageous woman who has high self-confidence, efficiency, who believes in her abilities.

In contrast to men there are certain limitations on certain things a woman can attempt to do but Uruvi is a woman of exceptional dynamism, energy and commitment. She was an inquisitive child who dare to play with boys and became a boss over them. She questions everything curiously to gain knowledge which later guides her interest to art, medicine, literature, horse riding, mathematics, gardening, etc. Uruvi condemned Guru Dhronacharya for not accepting Ekalaya and Karna as his students in spite of their ardent quest for archery. Thus, Uruvi voices not only for the need of education for women but also to the marginalized men. Though she is the only daughter of Pukeya King who pampered for all her needs and never given a moment of uneasiness but in her In-law's house she seemed to be treated as a goddess who dared to tread the mortal path. This kind of treatment made her feel lost in her new palace. She excelled in every single art. She is a woman of intelligence and alluring beauty. She is beautiful and brilliant, kind and outspoken, lovable and feverish at the same time. Kane describes Uruvi's beauty as, "*An heiress to her father's legacy, his intelligence, and her mother's flaming beauty*" (08). All together she has a charming beauty, a blithe audacity and a stubborn resilience which many people admired about her.

Kane presents two different perspectives of two wives of Karna towards their life. Uruvi always follows truth and her intelligence excels as a result of her education. On the other hand, Vrushali is an epitome of peace and love who keeps the family together. Though Vrushali was initially disturbed with Karna's marriage with Uruvi she accepts that if it makes Karna happy so be it. She is aware that Karna who has been treating her with utmost love and care wouldn't change. Uruvi does not feel comfortable around Vrushali because of her guilt of being intervened in Vrushali's marital life, she feels herself as an intruder. Though Vrushali tries to be nice to her she could not think well of her. Sharing Karna with Vrushali makes Uruvi discontent. Vrushali is so passionate with Karna that after his death she kills herself in grief. Except her jealousy, she serves everyone with her heart and soul. She is a versatile woman who fulfils all her responsibilities as she had been a good daughter, loyal wife, responsible daughter-in-law and a best mother. Uruvi's bravery is innate, she has the ability to confront all the societal challenges in her life. She is ridiculed by her close childhood friends and whenever she attends different royal occasions, the royal ladies mock her behind her

back. She didn't lock herself inside her house for the cold treatments and unkind remarks by such people after her marriage.

Uruvi is a good mentor for Karna who often points out the line between right and wrong. She often questions Duryodhana's friendship towards Karna as he merely plans to win the battle against Pandavas with the aid of Karna. "*Duryodhana can't be anyone's friend. He is simply using you against his cousins. The Duryodhana of the world will seek you out because they need you to serve their interest.*" (86). She warns him that his blind love for his friend had restricted him to distinguish between good and bad. He was so indebted to Duryodhana that he was blinded with gratitude. She tries hard to explain about Duryodhana's evilness to Karna, but in vain she was forced to resign herself as a mentor and had to live with her enemies throughout her life. She even remains deaf to the booming bond between them and had to accept the bitter truth of Karna's annihilation.

Kane depicted Uruvi incredibly honest through her powerful speech about the injustice imposed on Draupadi. She challenges the traditional and cliché male thoughts regarding women and their identity. She could not endure the pain of Draupadi when she was brutally humiliated by the Kauravas. She outraged to Karna about the shameful act of Duryodhana which she states this incident is the beginning of the end. She even labelled Karna as conniving as his friend Duryodhana as he was despicable. She remarked furiously, "Did it make you feel proud, great warrior, to pull a woman by her hair and haul her through the royal hall? Did it make you feel powerful, great warrior, to disrobe her, to deride her as a prostitute?" (116). She could not believe that the whole disgraceful incident was led by her beloved husband too. She foresees the disaster and decides to leave him for the rest of her life. She believes that a man who could not respect other woman's dignity is unfit for a respectful marital life. "*I love you but love comes with respect and that respect has gone*" (147). Her heart bleed for Draupadi and feels distressed for Karna as she knows for sure that Karna will face a drastic end for his disgraceful act.

Uruvi is an independent woman who prefer to live all alone by rejecting the throne of Hastinapur after Karna's death. She returns to Pukeya kingdom to live with her parents. The struggles which she faced in her life made her to lead her life by herself, to identify her individual existence as a woman. She became a new woman who possesses different aspects and perspective to visualize her own life. Once again, she broke the patriarchal norms. Though she is against the unjust norms of the society she chooses the power of healing to nurse the emotional scars of an individual on behalf of wars. Uruvi's perspective towards war as follows: "*You see war in its glory, I see its ugliness*" (213). She is so sympathetic that she healed the wounded soldiers in the war ground with a motherly care. When she was derided by Shona for serving the injured, she replied that it does not matter who looks after the injured as long as someone does. She was dismayed that how could one feel triumphant by hurting and killing others.

All the women characters in the novel are mysterious and are very different in their perspectives of life. Kane won as a writer by presenting every female character with acceptance and ignorance of values and their emotional instincts in the novel. The contemporary writers' choice of minor characters of mythological stories are not only meant to present the marginalized but also to represent their attitudes. Besides Sita and Draupadi whose stories are explored by many writers, there are new more historical female characters

like Kunti, Gandhari, Rukmani, Radha, etc. are being given importance by the modern writers. For example, *Sita's Sister* by Kavita Kane, *Mandodari: Queen of Lanka* by Manini J. Anandani, *Valmiki's Women* by Anand Neelakandan, *Rukmini: Krishna's Wife* by Sai Swaroopa Iyer is known for shedding light on the views of female protagonists thus by giving an insight into the life and aspirations of female characters.

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