



Reimagining the Mahabharata through Female Consciousness: A Study of Kavita Kane's Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen

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Abstract

The Mahabharata, one of the grandest epics of world literature, encapsulates an intricate web of human emotions, moral dilemmas, and social hierarchies. However, its traditional interpretations have largely been filtered through patriarchal sensibilities that glorify masculine valour while marginalizing women's voices. Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* revisits this ancient narrative through a contemporary feminist lens, reimagining the epic world as experienced by Uruvi, the wife of Karna. Through Uruvi's critical consciousness, the novel interrogates the nexus between gender, power, and myth, exposing the systemic oppression embedded in patriarchal narratives. This paper explores how Kane reconfigures myth as a space of feminist resistance, where Uruvi's voice destabilizes the binaries of dharma and adharma, privilege and marginality, silence and speech. Drawing on feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, the study situates *Karna's Wife* within the broader context of feminist mythmaking in Indian English literature. Kane's retelling transforms the Mahabharata from a tale of divine destiny into a discourse of human empathy and moral agency.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Kavita Kane, feminism, gender, power, myth, patriarchy, reinterpretation, Uruvi

Introduction

Mythology has long been the reservoir of a civilization's moral and cultural consciousness. Yet, in most traditions, it has been authored and interpreted by men and therefore bears the imprint of patriarchal ideology. In Indian mythology, women have often been confined to symbolic functions—goddess or temptress, mother or wife, chaste or fallen. Their subjectivities are muted, their emotions subordinated to the imperatives of dharma and familial duty. Feminist reinterpretations of myth thus serve not only as acts of literary revision but also as political interventions that reclaim the right to narrate the female experience within sacred and cultural memory.

Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013) is one such act of reclamation. By foregrounding Uruvi, a character briefly mentioned in the Mahabharata, Kane reconstructs the epic world from a woman's perspective. Uruvi's

narrative challenges the patriarchal glorification of war, heroism, and divine destiny by focusing instead on compassion, moral choice, and emotional truth. Through her love for Karna—the sutaputra stigmatized by birth yet ennobled by virtue—Uruvi questions the authority of caste, the cruelty of fate, and the hypocrisy of social order. Her voice becomes a site of contestation where myth and modernity converge.

This paper argues that Karna's Wife redefines the Mahabharata as a feminist narrative that interrogates the power structures of both mythology and society. By employing feminist theories of gender performativity and intersectionality, it examines how Kane destabilizes patriarchal hierarchies and reclaims women's agency within mythic discourse.

Literature Review

Reinterpretations of the Mahabharata have proliferated in modern Indian literature, reflecting a continuous dialogue between past and present. Writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (*The Palace of Illusions*), Pratibha Ray (*Yajnaseni*), and Kavita Kane have been instrumental in transforming mythic women from passive symbols into autonomous subjects. Divakaruni's *Draupadi*, for instance, narrates her story in the first person, asserting, "I was born of fire and I have lived in fire." Similarly, Kane's Uruvi speaks from the margins of history, offering an empathetic yet critical view of the epic's patriarchal morality.

Critical scholarship on feminist mythmaking in India often references the idea of "re-voicing" (Narasimhan, 2018)—the act of giving speech to women silenced in the canonical texts. This trend aligns with Adrienne Rich's concept of "re-vision," which she defines as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." In this sense, Karna's Wife exemplifies feminist re-visioning: it does not reject the myth but reconstructs it from within.

Kane's work has attracted attention for its psychological realism and humanistic portrayal of mythic figures. Critics like Ramaswamy (2020) note that Uruvi's narrative "humanizes Karna while simultaneously reclaiming the moral authority of feminine compassion." Yet, other scholars argue that Kane's feminism remains liberal rather than radical focused more on individual assertion than systemic revolution. Nevertheless, her reworking of Uruvi's character represents a vital contribution to the corpus of feminist retellings that challenge the male-centric epic tradition.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Readings of Myth

The feminist reinterpretation of myth operates at the intersection of literature, ideology, and identity. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* provides the foundational framework by asserting that woman is defined as the "Other" in a world designed by male subjectivity. Uruvi, as Kane portrays her, resists this process of "Othering" by asserting her intellectual and emotional independence within a male-dominated epic space.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990) further illuminates Uruvi's rebellion. Gender, Butler argues, is not an innate essence but a socially regulated performance. Uruvi's refusal to conform to the roles of submissive wife or silent queen is an act of performative subversion—she redefines what it means to be a woman in her world. Her dialogue with Kunti, for instance, lays bare the internalized oppression of women who uphold patriarchal values under the guise of dharma.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's concept of "feminism without borders" also resonates in Kane's work. Uruvi's consciousness transcends caste, class, and royal privilege; she empathizes with the marginalized and challenges the discriminatory structures that

define both gender and identity. Her marriage to Karna, a man stigmatized as a charioteer's son, becomes an act of social and moral rebellion.

Through these theoretical lenses, Karna's Wife emerges as a text that reclaims myth as a feminist discourse—an arena where women articulate resistance not only through speech but through choice, compassion, and conscience.

Gender and Power Dynamics in the Mahabharata

The Mahabharata is often seen as a cosmic drama of dharma, yet beneath its moral grandeur lies a deeply gendered power structure. Women in the epic—Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and others—are pivotal to the plot yet powerless in agency. Their fates are determined by the ambitions of men and the decrees of destiny. Draupadi's humiliation in the Kaurava court stands as the ultimate metaphor for female objectification within patriarchal order. Kunti's silence about Karna's birth, motivated by fear of social stigma, further exposes how women internalize and perpetuate patriarchal morality.

Against this backdrop, Uruvi's voice in Karna's Wife assumes radical significance. She confronts the deterministic logic of the epic and demands moral accountability where tradition permits none. When she challenges Krishna's political manipulations or questions Bhishma's notions of righteousness, she exposes the moral blindness of patriarchal dharma. Her empathy toward Karna is not blind devotion but an ethical recognition of his humanity beyond caste or destiny.

As Uruvi declares, "He was the man I loved, not the birth he bore." In that single line lies the essence of Kane's feminist subversion—the assertion of individual conscience over inherited hierarchy.

Uruvi's Voice: Reclaiming the Female Perspective

Kane's Uruvi is neither the submissive wife nor the defiant radical; she embodies a complex blend of intellect, emotion, and moral clarity. Her love for Karna is not romantic idealism but conscious resistance against the social order. By marrying an outcast, she symbolically dismantles the boundaries of caste and privilege that define patriarchal power.

Through Uruvi's first-person narration, Kane reclaims the female gaze that was historically denied in mythic storytelling. The epic world, which traditionally glorifies masculine warfare and divine politics, is reimagined through domestic intimacy, maternal compassion, and ethical introspection. When Uruvi tends to Karna's wounds after the Kurukshetra battle, the grandeur of war dissolves into the human pain of loss and futility. Her lament—"How many mothers have lost their sons to a war that no one wanted?"—turns the heroic epic into a dirge for humanity.

Uruvi's relationship with other women—especially Kunti and Draupadi—further enriches Kane's feminist vision. She sympathizes with their suffering even as she critiques their complicity. Kunti's concealment of Karna's birth is, for Uruvi, not mere cowardice but a symptom of systemic fear: the fear of being judged as a woman in a world ruled by men. Similarly, Uruvi's empathy for Draupadi transcends jealousy; it becomes a shared recognition of female endurance in a patriarchal cosmos.

Deconstructing Patriarchal Mythmaking

The power of Karna's Wife lies in its deconstruction of patriarchal mythmaking. By shifting the narrative focus from gods and heroes to women's experiences, Kane destabilizes the epic's ideological core. The mythic notion of dharma, which justifies social hierarchy and gender subjugation, is exposed as a human construct rather than divine truth. Uruvi repeatedly questions the double standards that glorify male honor while condemning female desire or dissent.

In one striking passage, she reflects, "If loyalty to dharma means cruelty to love,

then what god would demand such faith?" This statement encapsulates the novel's critique of patriarchal morality. It aligns with Beauvoir's assertion that "patriarchy has always defined woman in relation to man, never as an autonomous being." Uruvi's moral rebellion thus becomes a feminist redefinition of dharma—not as obedience to authority, but as fidelity to justice and empathy.

Furthermore, Kane reimagines Karna not merely as a tragic hero but as a human being crushed by the weight of social injustice. Uruvi's understanding of his pain transforms the epic of fate into a narrative of moral awareness. Through her, Kane recasts mythology as an ethical space where compassion transcends hierarchy.

Reclaiming Myth through Feminist Humanism

Kane's reinterpretation does not simply invert gender roles; it seeks to humanize them. Uruvi's compassion extends even to her adversaries, reflecting what can be termed feminist humanism—the belief that empathy, rather than power, defines moral greatness. In rejecting vengeance and valor, Uruvi articulates an alternative vision of strength rooted in care and ethical integrity.

This approach distinguishes Kane's retelling from both traditional and radical feminisms. It does not demonize men or idealize women; instead, it exposes how both are trapped in the machinery of social hierarchy. As Uruvi observes, "Men fight for honor, women suffer for it." The statement captures the tragic reciprocity of patriarchy—its power sustained by mutual suffering and silence.

Through such humanistic re-imagination, Karna's Wife transforms myth into moral inquiry, reclaiming the sacred not as divine authority but as shared humanity.

Conclusion

Karna's Wife stands as a landmark in contemporary Indian feminist writing for its ability to merge mythic grandeur with emotional realism. By retelling the Mahabharata from Uruvi's perspective, Kavita Kane dismantles patriarchal mythmaking and restores the silenced female consciousness to the center of narrative power. Uruvi's journey from a royal princess to an outcast's queen becomes a metaphor for the feminist struggle to assert voice, choice, and identity in a world that sanctifies male dominance.

The novel's significance lies not only in its portrayal of female strength but in its ethical critique of the structures that define gender and power. In transforming myth into a medium of feminist reflection, Kane echoes Beauvoir's call for women to become subjects of their own stories, not objects of male legend. Karna's Wife thus invites readers to revisit the Mahabharata—not as a chronicle of divine destiny, but as a living text that continues to mirror and challenge the human condition.

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