

Deconstructing Mythical Archetypes: An Analytical Study of Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen through a Feminist Lens

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Abstract—This paper examines Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013) through a feminist lens. It explores how the novel challenges traditional mythical archetypes found in the Mahabharata, especially those related to women. By focusing on Uruvi, a character who remains almost invisible in the original epic, Kane brings forward a female voice that questions caste, patriarchy, war, and destiny. This paper argues that Kane reshapes the epic tradition by giving emotional depth, moral agency, and intellectual presence to a woman who would otherwise remain silent. Using ideas from feminist thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the paper explains how Uruvi becomes both an "outcast" and a "queen," challenging fixed ideas about gender, power, and identity. Overall, the study shows how modern mythological fiction can open new spaces for women's voices within classical narratives.

Index Terms—Feminism, Indian mythology, Mahabharata retellings, Kavita Kane, Karna's Wife, female agency, mythical archetypes, marginalisation, identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian epics like the Mahabharata have shaped cultural ideas about duty, heroism, and morality for centuries. These stories are filled with powerful male figures - kings, warriors, and divine guides - whose actions drive the narrative forward. Women are present, but their roles are often limited. They appear as devoted wives, grieving mothers, or symbols of honour, rather than as individuals with independent thoughts and

choices. Because of this, many female characters remain unheard or underdeveloped.

Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* offers a fresh way of reading the epic. Instead of retelling the Mahabharata from the viewpoint of its famous heroes, Kane tells the story through Uruvi, the wife of Karna. In the original epic, Uruvi receives little attention, but Kane places her at the centre of the narrative. This shift is important because it allows readers to see the epic world from a woman's perspective.

Looking at this novel through feminist literary theory helps explain why Kane's retelling matters. Feminist criticism focuses on how literature represents women and how their voices are shaped or silenced by society. Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote that women are often treated as "the Other," valued mainly in relation to men (Beauvoir 26). Uruvi's role in the epic tradition fits this pattern. She exists largely as "Karna's wife," not as an individual. Kavita Kane's novel challenges this idea by showing Uruvi's inner thoughts, doubts, and moral struggles.

Judith Butler's idea that gender roles are socially performed rather than naturally fixed also helps in understanding Uruvi's character (Butler 33). Uruvi does not behave like the traditional epic wife who silently supports her husband. She questions him, challenges social rules, and refuses to accept injustice. Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" becomes relevant when we consider both Karna's caste-based exclusion and

Uruvi's position as a woman within a patriarchal society (Spivak 287).

This paper argues that Karna's Wife breaks down old mythical archetypes and rebuilds them from a feminist point of view. By giving Uruvi a strong voice, Kane reshapes how readers understand women's roles in myth and history.

II. MYTHICAL ARCHETYPES AND FEMINIST REINTERPRETATION

Mythical archetypes are recurring character patterns that reflect cultural values. Carl Jung described archetypes as images rooted in both the collective psyche and cultural tradition (Jung 42). In Indian epics, women often appear as Devoted Wives, Sacrificial Mothers, or Dutiful Queens - roles that celebrate virtue and obedience more than autonomy or intellect.

Kavita Kane disrupts these archetypes by giving Uruvi agency, voice, and selfhood. She is not just an extension of Karna's story; she becomes the lens through which the epic world is explored. Uruvi refuses to fit the archetype of the silent wife. She questions patriarchal norms, caste hierarchy, and royal politics. Kane writes, "Uruvi refused to accept that a man's worth lay in his birth and not in his deeds" (Kane 14). This moment shows Uruvi's ideological independence. By insisting that merit matters more than birth, she challenges a foundational principle of the Mahabharata, where Karna's lower cast defines his social exclusion.

Feminist criticism has long examined how patriarchy and caste often intersect, with women's bodies becoming sites of social control and caste reproduction (Chakravarti 579). Kane allows Uruvi to resist these restrictions, making her a figure who critiques both gender and caste hierarchies.

III. URUVI AS THE OUTCAST'S QUEEN

The phrase "The Outcast's Queen" reflects the tension at the heart of Uruvi's identity. As a princess, Uruvi belongs to the royal world. As Karna's wife, she is pushed to the margins of society. Karna's low caste status makes him an outsider, and Uruvi shares that exclusion once she chooses him.

Her decision to marry Karna is one of the most powerful acts in the novel. It is not arranged for

political gain or family honour. It is a choice made from love and conviction. Kane describes how Uruvi knows the consequences of her choice: "She knew the court would never forgive her for choosing Karna over a Kshatriya prince, but she chose nonetheless" (Kane 52). This moment shows Uruvi's courage. She accepts social rejection rather than betray her values.

Judith Butler's idea of gender as performance helps explain why this choice is so radical. Royal women are expected to demonstrate obedience and loyalty to social rules. Uruvi refuses this performance. By choosing Karna, she challenges both caste hierarchy and patriarchal marriage customs.

At the same time, Uruvi's position as queen gives her insight into power and politics. She sees how kingdoms value honour over humanity and victory over compassion. Her unique position allows her to question the moral foundations of the epic world.

IV. IDENTITY, EMOTION, AND INNER LIFE

One of the most important feminist aspects of the novel is its focus on Uruvi's inner world. Traditional epics rarely explore what women think or feel beyond grief or devotion. Kane changes this by allowing Uruvi to narrate and reflect.

Uruvi constantly thinks about fate and choice. At one point, she wonders, "Was destiny merely a cruel design, or could love undo what fate inscribed?" (Kane 212). This question shows her struggle to understand whether human beings can resist destiny. It also introduces a softer, more emotional way of reading the epic, which contrasts with the masculine focus on war and honour.

By centring emotion and doubt, Kane challenges the idea that heroism must be violent. Uruvi's reflections suggest that questioning war is not weakness but moral strength. As Bijay Nanda notes, "Modern retellings often unsettle the heroic masculine ideal by emphasising emotional and ethical complexity" (Nanda 94).

V. MARGINALISATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Uruvi's marriage to Karna places her in a painful position. She becomes an outsider in her own royal family and is never fully accepted in Karna's world either. Kane captures this feeling when she writes,

“She felt the stares of the court upon her; she had become the outsider among her own people” (Kane 88).

This sense of not belonging reflects what feminist scholars describe as intersectional marginalisation. Uruvi is marginalised because she is a woman and because of her association with a man considered socially inferior. Uma Chakravarti explains that ancient social systems often controlled women to preserve caste purity (Chakravarti 567). Uruvi’s choice threatens this system, which is why she is judged so harshly.

Yet, her marginal position also gives her clarity. Standing outside the centre of power allows her to see its cruelty more clearly. She becomes a quiet critic of the social order that values lineage over humanity.

VI. AGENCY AND RESISTANCE

Uruvi’s strength does not lie in physical power. Instead, it lies in her moral voice. She questions Karna’s loyalty to Duryodhana and challenges the idea that friendship justifies injustice. She scolds Karna for his mistake in disrobing Draupadi and decides to leave him, in spite of her being pregnant with a child. She is not the type of wife who just follows orders and sits at her husband's side,

You talk about dharma, but what sort of righteousness is that which cannot rise above your wrong sense of obligation to your friend Duryodhana, knowing fully well that his evil intentions have no limits? You are so fixated on your negative status and low birth, and yet, it prompted you to call Draupadi a harlot; it instigated you to order her to be stripped. (Kane 117)

She also questions Krishna’s acceptance of war. Kane presents her asking, “Why must the blood of sons pay the debts of kings?” (Kane 234).

This question cuts to the heart of the epic’s violence. It exposes how ordinary people suffer for the ambitions of rulers. Feminist thinkers argue that such questioning is a form of resistance because it challenges dominant narratives (Tong 89). Uruvi may not stop the war, but she refuses to glorify it.

Her resistance shows that loyalty does not mean silence. Even as a devoted wife, she does not give up her ethical judgment. This challenges the traditional image of the obedient epic wife and replaces it with a more complex and realistic woman.

VII. REIMAGINATION OF MYTH THROUGH A FEMINIST LENS

Karna’s Wife belongs to a growing body of modern mythological fiction that reclaims ancient stories for new audiences. Feminist writers use myth to question old values and imagine fairer worlds. Rather than rejecting tradition, they reinterpret it.

Scholars note that such retellings do not simply add women to old stories but reshape the stories themselves (Kumar 112). Kane’s novel does exactly this. By telling the epic through Uruvi’s eyes, it changes what the epic means. War becomes tragedy rather than glory. Loyalty becomes a moral struggle rather than blind devotion.

Uruvi’s refusal to fit into a single role shows that gender identities are not fixed. They are shaped by culture and can be reshaped through storytelling. In this way, Kane’s novel keeps the epic alive by making it speak to modern concerns about equality and justice.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen offers a powerful feminist reinterpretation of the Mahabharata. By placing Uruvi at the centre of the story, Kavita Kane breaks down traditional mythical archetypes that limit women to silence and sacrifice. Uruvi emerges as a thoughtful, questioning, and morally aware character who challenges caste prejudice, patriarchal norms, and the glorification of war.

This paper has shown that Kavita Kane’s novel gives women a voice within a tradition that has often denied them one. Uruvi’s role as both outcast and queen highlights how identity is shaped by power, choice, and resistance. Her story reminds readers that myths are not fixed truths but living narratives that can be rewritten.

In reimagining Uruvi, Kane expands the space for female subjectivity in classical literature. The novel encourages readers to see epic women not as shadows behind great men, but as individuals with their own thoughts, doubts, and ethical strength. Through this feminist retelling, myth becomes a site of dialogue rather than domination, making it more inclusive, humane, and relevant to contemporary readers.

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