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## **Marginality in *Mahabharata*: Revisiting Class and Gender question in Kavita**

### ***Kane's Karna's Wife: the Outcast's Queen***

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**Abstract** Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* is a retelling of *Mahabharata* from the perspective of a woman outcast by choice. Karna, an able warrior deprived of his identity and dignity fights against social discrimination and gradation to prove his potential. He is aided in his revolution by his trusted friend Duryodhana and his supportive wives. The great warrior is however gender insensitive. Kane seeks to unravel the silence regarding the personal life of the enchanting personality Karna and examine the contributions of the women of great warriors. She explores the plight of marginal women in the epic hitherto neglected and unrecognized. The remarkable bonding between the privileged and unprivileged class, love, compassion, understanding and support between them make Kane's interpretation grand and beautiful. This paper addresses the issue of marginality in the novel and comment on the characters misinterpreted and popularized through numerous representations till date.

**Key words:** Outcaste, silence, class, gender, bonding.

Epics are the earliest documents of Indian society, its structural framework and network of operations. The numerous stories and multiple characters allow readers to have an extensive view of human life and its complexities. The readers can hardly contain their urge to delve deeper into human psychology and unfold the myriads of emotions and conflicts which find their parallel in life. Time and again, it has been repeatedly pointed out that social hierarchy, social foundation, social interest carry greater value than individual life and justice. In question to this paper, I would like to restrict my reading to Kavita Kane's interpretation of *The Mahabharata* in *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. The novel revisits the epic *Mahabharata* from the theoretical perspectives of post-structuralism and feminism to explore the mental turmoil, consciousness and thought processes



of the enigmatic characters.

Re-engagement with epics is not a new phenomenon. Scholars and writers are jointly venturing into these ancient realms with greater interest and vigour in recent years. Yet, Kane's representation stands unique against the long queue of texts battling for adoption, in her resurrection of marginal characters and imposition of conscience. She employs dramatic license to incorporate the imaginary female character, Uruvi, Karna's wife (1) in order to uncover the unknown facts of Karna's life. Karna, the most appealing and mysterious but damned character in the Indian classical epic has always been examined in comparison to his arch-rival Arjuna or with respect to his friendship with Duryodhana, both of them central characters. Karna's marginality within the epic is re-ascertained by the fact of his ambiguous, patchy portraiture as a family person. The creation of Uruvi replenishes this gap by not only illuminating the character of Karna but also by the imaginary contemplation and depiction of the predicament of the wives of a socially ostracized, determined and aspiring man. Her advantageous royal belonging, association, intelligence and sensitivity to social and cultural processes are designed to play the eternal and ever-seeing human conscience. The inscrutable tricky primary narrative and emergence of new critical theories complimenting the idea of 'death of author' (2) provide occasion for uncountable renditions befitting the requirements of the age. In pursuit of unraveling the abominable patriarchal, discriminating and exploitative nature of society, scholars are aiming at the roots of cultural dissemination. The repeated reproductions of the epic knowingly and unknowingly consolidate and perpetuate insensitivity towards gender and humanity. Hence, there arises the need to re-interpret and re-analyze the text which archetypes ideal Indian society. The epic has ceased to be solely a religious text about the eternal war between good and evil, right and wrong. Kane's endeavour in rewriting the epic, *Mahabharata*, adds an extra mile to the undergoing scholarly efforts. Her creation of the imaginary character, Uruvi becomes a part of the prevalent refashioning and recreating exercises in literature to suit the temperament and needs of a particular era. Kane's careful introduction of a character high born but sharing the life of a low class by choice produces a departure from the flow of literary experiments. As a result, the text is prevented from being essentialized as literature from the ground. Uruvi's bonding with both the worlds, the Kshatriya clan



and the *suta* class, strives to provide unprejudiced representation of characters and situations. This paper will read the novel from both the gender and class margins in order to elucidate the center as well as the periphery. It will consider the lived experiences of a female outcast by choice, and her power and grit in accosting society.

Mahabharata has often been read as a class narrative from the stand-point of Karna, who had lifelong suffered the brunt of low birth in a society hell bent on class preservation. We zoom in our lenses on Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas or on Kunti or Gandhari when we talk of gender. But, have we ever cared for the inconspicuous female characters within the epic? They haven't ever been mentioned of in any mode of reproductions or representations. Pre-occupation with the center often provide a partial knowledge or even distorted view of circumstances and characters. A character requires to be measured by all standards of relationships and situations before coming to any conclusion. Kane's keen eyesight salvages the characters in the supporting roles, specially the wives of the great men from getting overshadowed and fading into oblivion. By throwing the spotlight on the private realm, Kane tries to depict the interconnections between the two worlds: interior and exterior. How the politics of the former affect the peace and serenity of the latter. How, women are invariably drawn into men's politics and rivalry while society puts on a garb of paternalism towards 'weak', 'defenseless' women. We all remember the disgraceful scene of Draupadi's humiliation. The silence regarding Karna's married life accounts for the inscrutability of the character. Discussion on how his wives reacted to his lack of sense of belonging, misplaced loyalty, and most significantly his role in the molestation of a woman, will shed light on marginality and enable better scrutiny of the characters. The honest, inquisitive, tongue in cheek Uruvi probes and prods the characters into self-introspection and confession. In this paper, I would like to analyze the experiences of a subject doubly sub-altern by class and gender.

In the novel, Uruvi, the princess of Pukeya, daughter of king Vahusha, was brought up amidst all sorts of lavishness, extravagance that one could imagine of. Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, and Uruvi's mother's childhood friend, pampered her as foster- mother. She even confided her dream of making Uruvi her daughter-in law to Uruvi's mother, an arrangement which was readily agreed upon by the latter. As a playmate to the Kauravas and Pandavas, Uruvi enjoyed



the advantage of knowing her friends intimately from childhood. While, she was contemptuous about Duryodhana for his evil ways, she sided with the Pandavas like everybody else. Bhishma Pitamaha, Gandhari, and every other person doted on the charming, intelligent, loving princess. However, with the appearance of Karna in the royal precincts, the facades, treachery and tyranny of society became blatantly exposed. She sensed her world changing, people whom she have known for years becoming strangers, when she challenged social norms by declaring love for a lower class, a *sutaputra* and proposing to marry him. Uruvi fought the entire world to win him. Although, she had to pay an exorbitant price of incurring the rage and rivalry of neighbouring rulers, she managed to have a *swayamvara* in its truest sense. She enjoyed the chance of choosing the person she loved as her life partner instead of being carried away as a trophy by the ablest Kshatriya warrior. It rarely happened that a woman could marry the person she loved.

The title of the novel “Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen” becomes obvious and clear at this juncture. Karna was married and was a father to sons when Uruvi gained admittance into his life. However, Kane seeks to draw reader’s attention specifically towards Uruvi by adding the term ‘Queen’ at the tail of the title and also by the use of the singular form of ‘wife’. She also emphasizes the sort of relation that existed between Karna and Uruvi through her choice of expression. Howsoever, in the course of this paper, I would consider the peril of both the wives: Vrushali and Uruvi, each antithetical to the other. Karna points out to his brother, Shona: “I think Vrushali loves me for myself and not for what I may become. Whatever happens to me or whatever I do, I shall never disappoint her. But I am not good enough for Uruvi” (Kane 67). This discussion highlights the fact that despite Karna’s enough faith in Vrushali, she was after all taken for granted. Vrushali, his first wife was mature, calm, cool, tolerant, adjustable and wise. She had the perfect ‘wifely’ qualities of gentleness and dutifulness. She belonged to the same class of *adhiraths* as that of her husband. Karna and Vrushali shared happy, contented conjugal life and were devoted to each other till the appearance of Draupadi between them. Vrushali was docile and compliant in everything her husband did. She showed mute submission when Karna attended Draupadi’s *swayamvara* and desired to marry her. Vrushali was helpless when she lost her eldest son in the scuffle following Draupadi’s casteist remark at her *swayamvara*. She had no rights over her



children since they belonged to their father. The father decided the fate and future of his children. So, Vrushali was powerless and failed to save any of her children from getting slaughtered in the fateful war of Kurukshetra. She also was bound to resign to her fate without protest when he unexpectedly married Uruvi and brought her home. Vrushali was in no way different from the other royal ladies in the past and present who had no right to voice their disagreement and decision over their lord. Before Vrushali, women like Amba, Ambika, Ambalika, Gandhari and Kunti were also victims of deception and exploitation but were powerless to confront society. The practice of Polygamy was acceptable and recognized in society so women had no option other than sharing their husbands with other women. Draupadi, who had dared to question the court on rights and duties of a husband, morality, *dharma* and justice, also happened to be the second wife of her husbands. Vrushali was pleased to perform her duties according to social expectations. She was satisfied to play the part of a 'good' wife displaying patience, attention and determination only to see her husband happy. She had no aspirations for herself or for her husband but was content to have him by her side.

On the other hand, Uruvi was diametrically opposite to Vrushali. Younger by many years, she was willful and rebellious. She lived her life by her choice and took her life's decisions to which she remained steadfast till her last breath. Uruvi braved all odds, 'antagonism' and 'disgrace' to marry her love, Karna. Her marriage was only a beginning to a series of trials. She remained honest to her own self throughout and took responsibility of her decisions. A woman has no caste, class of her own. Her identity depends on the family she is born into until her marriage into another family. She is then identified through her belonging and liability to her marital household. Nonetheless, a woman is not above class or caste. Uruvi's marriage to Karna meant her 'fall from grace'. "She was neither the Princess of Pukeya anymore nor would she ever be accepted as the Queen of Anga." (Kane 59) Despite Duryodhana pronouncing Karna as the king of Anga, society never acknowledged him as a king. The Royal clans never let him forget his lineage and his true place. Karna, ignorant of his actual identity, identified himself through his foster parents Radha and Adhirath, who belonged to the class of *sutas*. He was the unwanted, illegitimate son of an unwed Kshatriya mother who abandoned him in a river, in desperation to save social status and reputation. All through his life, Karna had to bear the yoke of low class identity and suffer the social ills



associated with it. He was treated as an outcaste when he attempted to learn archery, a skill which was reserved for the privileged Kshatriya class, from Guru Dronacharya, the Kshatriya guru himself. Karna's aspirations were curtailed at every step and he was disallowed from competing with the famous archer Arjuna for not being a Kshatriya. He underwent public humiliation for the second time when he dared to compete with other Kshatriya princes for the hand of the Kshatriya princess, Draupadi in marriage. Karna was rudely reminded of his ineligibility and ambition in dreaming of marrying a Kshatriya princess being an outcast. So, as an outcast's wife, Uruvi too had to suffer social chastisement and derision. She had to share his turbulent past, fretful present and tormenting future. But, she never became dispirited or regretted her decision. In tough times, she consoled her mind by saying that she married the love of her life, a privilege enjoyed by very few women in her society. By stooping below her caste to marry Karna, Uruvi lost her friends, relationships, and society. She and her family turned into an outcast overnight. Uruvi relinquished the comforts of her palace, fineries, most importantly her respect, prestige, position, influence in order to become the companion of the *sutaputra*. Her trial did not end here. In the adopted new home, unlike Vrushali, she was greeted as an unwelcome guest forcibly intruding into the lives of a well-knit family. Karna's parents looked worried and regarded her "in open awe, as if she was a goddess who dared to tread the mortal path" (Kane 51). Karna's brother, Shona, who was fiercely protective about his elder sister-in-law, openly displayed contempt and disapproved of their marriage. He distrusted her for her Kshatriya identity and considered as a threat to family's peace and happiness. Shona vociferously proclaimed that Uruvi was "a stranger, *an outsider*"(emphasis added) who would never be able to adjust with them. Karna's first wife, Vrushali's reaction as expected was cool, unemotional, distanced and formal. And finally, Karna, for whom she left everything, idealized her like the Petrarchan lover. He idolized her for fighting the whole world for his sake. She was yet miles away from becoming his soul-mate. Uruvi, about whose incisive wit Kane never lets her readers forget, was quick to notice the malice, bias and flaws in the actions of the people she revered and considered to be just. She constantly harped on the human conscience, and pestered her elders with questions whenever they had taken a biased decision. She enquired Bhishma of his partiality in rejecting Karna but accepting Satyawati, a daughter of a fisherman as



his father's wife and Queen, and all the sons of entire Kuru family, none of whom were blue-blooded, as his descendants. Uruvi also unhesitatingly declared Kunti to be responsible for making Karna a *pariah*, an outcast within his family and society. She reasoned that it was desertion, opposition and neglect of the good and righteous that led him to befriend evil. Duryodhana, in spite of being malicious, was the only person who came to his rescue and treated him with due respect when he was being subjected to ignominy. He was the sole person to publicly acknowledge Karna's goodness, nobility, courage and most importantly his worthiness as a great archer and warrior.

Uruvi was a perfect blend of rationality and emotion. Uruvi fell in love with Karna at the moment when he challenged Arjuna in the competition ground. "...Uruvi saw in Karna all the qualities of a hero who was not being permitted to be one." (Kane 12) Her compassion for a person denied honour and justice, gradually snowballed into love. She dreamt of becoming his true companion, his counselor, and his protector. She wanted to share his feelings, pain and even ambitions. Through her effort, Karna could find himself a confidante with whom he could discuss every matter from political to personal. However, despite her persistent effort, Uruvi failed to counsel Karna against forming alliance with Duryodhana. The hunger for identity, social acceptance and dream of living like a warrior pushed him towards his doom. If Duryodhana had used Karna for self-interest, Karna too had utilized Duryodhana to realize his dream of competing with Arjuna. Duryodhana was his only chance and Kurukshetra the only place to prove his potential and win the honour and dignity he truly deserved. It was he who pestered Duryodhana for face-to-face combat with his cousins Pandavas instead of resorting to mischievous means. In aiding Duryodhana in expanding his kingdom to whole of Aryabharta (3), he not only re-paid his debt and gratitude, he also demonstrated his potential as a warrior. Karna, even participated in the heinous crime of abducting women from their swayamvaras (just like Bhishma in the past) to gratify his friend. This barbaric deed committed by an otherwise noble man makes Karna's character even more complex and ambiguous. Both his wives along with other well-wishers were compelled to swallow Karna's friendship with Duryodhana, his self-surrendering gratitude towards him and finally his death in service of his friend. Uruvi's companionship, support and acknowledgement alone proved to be insufficient to pacify ambitious and resolute Karna. Karna desired acceptance and recognition for





his merits from the royal Patriarch, the heads of society and from all those who hailed Arjuna as the greatest archer and compared Karna with him. So, Uruvi's solicitous act of individually crediting and comforting Karna, could not subdue his craving for honour and respect. Nonetheless, the companionship of Duryodhana and Uruvi with Karna (friendship between the privileged and unprivileged or rather between two differently marginalized people) continue to be exemplarily redemptive and restitutive. Karna too returned his heartfelt gratitude and pledged to protect them. Karna's feelings are best expressed when he says: "Uruvi ... is like a wild exotic flower in a desert who must be sheltered from the bitter winds. I want to protect Uruvi; she has fought the world to be with me" (Kane 67).

Uruvi was much inexperienced, impetuous and expressive in comparison to Vrushali. She was wrong in assuming that Karna's embittered heart needed her loving protection and healing skills. Nevertheless, her emotional succor was haven for him. He actually wanted to change society which valued one's lineage, social hierarchy over an individual's merit. He was ready to die for his cause. Uruvi's wifely anxieties got better of her and she united with Vrushali in helplessness, pain and bereavement. She left no stone unturned yet like Vrushali she failed to save her husband from certain death. Both the women also suffered shame and mortification for Karna's fondness for Draupadi. There existed a complex love-hate relationship between Karna and Draupadi. Draupadi symbolized power, position, honour and bewitching beauty; everything that the deprived, disadvantaged Karna lusted after. The situation deteriorated with Karna's revengeful attack on the Pandavas's wife in order to make her realize the sufferings of a social 'pariah'. He joined Duryodhana and Dushashana in publicly deriding Draupadi and called her a 'whore'. He wanted to deflate her pride of class and beauty. His wounded male pride desired to triumph over that woman who dared to abase him in public. It was Karna's remark which instigated Dushashana to disrobe Draupadi. But, it was Draupadi herself who had "sown the seeds of hate and humiliation" by scorning Karna for his low birth and jeering Duryodhana for his inheritance of blindness from his father. The dice game on that ill-fated day gave them the opportunity to humble her haughty pride. It was not only a play of fate and fortune, honour and wealth but it was also a ploy for involuntary exposition of all the characters. After the game, the characters stand adjudicated and mortified.



Although the Panchali Princess had harboured secret love for Karna, she was reluctant to 'break social norms' and marry below her caste. The public spectacle of injuring feminine integrity of Draupadi forced her to fall below social standards and connect with the margin. She bonded with the marginalized in their longing for self-respect and honour. Karna's wives had to bear the brunt of his misogynist remark and the consequences of his participation in this historic event of utmost savagery. Although, Vrushali, in allegiance to her nature was quick to forgive her husband and consoled repentant Karna, Uruvi was inconsolable. She could no more continue to admire, love or even tolerate his company. She became certain that the war was inevitable with two disgraced and stigmatized individuals resolved to redress their situation and win back their lost dignity. Draupadi united also with Uruvi and Vrushali with respect to the impending misfortune which encircled each one's lives and apprehension of inevitable doom.

While, Karna believed the battle-field to be sacred enough to 'fight for honour and truth', Uruvi resented war for the wastage of uncountable innocent lives. In order to survive the madness infesting their lives, Uruvi tried to comfort herself by treating the maimed. Healing the wounds of the wounded warriors was therapeutic but also created other wounds in the process. She faced criticism from many and Shona was harshest of all. He accused Uruvi once again of being an outsider as she neither befitted a Kshatriya Princess nor a Warrior's wife. She was questioned of her allegiance, support and duties towards Karna. This was yet another test for Uruvi for being the wife of a great warrior. She nursing the warriors injured by or because of her husband did not comply with the respect, aura, and abilities of her husband. It rather inspired duality, suspicion and sneer in the minds of the subjects. Her actions once again defied social norm and expectations. She was thus held answerable to the blind associate of Karna.

The eighteen day war in Kurushetra left everyone bereaved and mourning. Every family had paid the price of war but most by the Kuru dynasty who lost hundred sons in one war. Karna's sacrifice ultimately transformed the characters who were all accountable for his death. His mother, Kunti, finally publicly acknowledges him as her son, the Pandavas were doomed to live in repentance for their misdemeanor and treacherous murder of their elder brother. Before his death, Duryodhana too was transformed by the generosity and love of Karna, who fought against his own



people for his sake. If not in life, at least in death Karna enjoyed the respect due of a warrior. The death of Karna and his sons devastated Vrushali who soon lost her sanity. Uruvi retaining her allegiance to her marital household, decided to stay with Vrushali and Karna's parents and look after them. She also devoted herself in caring for the helpless and suffering. She proclaimed: "My place is here- with Radha, with Vrushali, and with the sick and the maimed" (Kane 301). Uruvi's unconditional surrender to Karna and to his peripheral identity did not end with his departure. She continued to support and heal the physical and mental bruises of her people. Uruvi's presence served to be a burning reminder for Kunti and her sons about the injustice and crime they have committed. With respect to Karna's sense of self-dignity, Uruvi rejected the offer of Krishna, Kunti and the Pandavas to accompany them. However, remembering Karna's unfulfilled desire, she reluctantly approved of Arjuna's request for training her son Vrishaketu along with Lord Krishna. She thus carried forward the dreams and desires of Karna even after his death. After the death of her remaining family members, Uruvi retired to her childhood home. The novel concludes beautifully with the characters' retreat to motherhood and childhood, where kindles all attachment, education, reformation and reconstruction.

Since time immemorial, the privileged have adopted on their own the responsibility of commenting, analyzing and determining the needs, difficulties and crisis in the lives of the unprivileged. However, these discourses from the center have often failed to truly interpret the situation of the periphery and do justice to them because of their detachment from the actual lived experiences. The fear of compromising one's privileges and desire to keep the basic social framework intact also affect the mainstream discourses to a great extent. Kane makes use of the trope of inter-class love and marriage in the highly stratified ancient society to gauge the characters closely by joining in their experiences. With the interpolation of the active character, Uruvi, the plight of the wives of the great warriors in the epic is intensified through contrast. The feminist within Uruvi questions society within the text itself rather than from outside. This technique not only unsettles the calm composure and negligent attitude of society but also reveal the flaws and hypocrisies embedded within it. The wives of Karna were far more marginalized than Karna himself since they were bereft of both class and gender influence. Karna, though beaten by society, still enjoyed rights over his family. His wives were marginalized both within and outside the



family. As long as society continues to discriminate and grade human beings, center and periphery would remain an inescapable reality. History has witnessed discontentment and revolution from below time and again whenever the downtrodden became zealous enough to voice their plight and recover their situations. Karna's life long war with his marginality ultimately translated into the actual war of Kurukshetra. The marginal women characters, Uruvi, Vrushali too fought their individual wars with themselves as well as with society. Vrushali's silent suffering turned her into an insane. She reacted to society's pre-occupation with gender and class disparity, honour and pride through her escape in death. Uruvi, her folly, decided to fight with the perpetrators of social ills in society. Her indomitable will, empathy for the battered individuals, support and resistance to social injustices sustained the revolution initiated by Karna. She actually took the rebellion to a much deeper level, to the battleground of conscience and inner precincts of home. Her retreat to her childhood and sharing of her motherhood with the royal queen Draupadi, indicated her treating of social wounds and creating it anew.

### Notes

- (1) Here I have referred to Roland Barthes's concept of 'death of author' in his essay 'The Death of the Author', published in 1968.
- (2) Aryabharta was the ancient name of the land now called India. It obtained its name from the Aryans who ruled the land.

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