



Reclaiming the Divine Feminine: Exploring Femininity in Indian Mythology through Contemporary Indian Fiction

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Abstract:

This research project examines the representation of femininity in Indian mythology through the lens of contemporary Indian fiction. By analyzing the portrayal of female protagonists in select literary texts, this study aims to uncover the complexities of Indian womanhood and its intersection with mythology, culture, and society.

Drawing from postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks, this research investigates how contemporary Indian fiction challenges, subverts, or reinforces traditional mythological narratives of femininity. The study explores themes such as:

- The reclamation of divine feminine archetypes in Indian mythology.*
- The negotiation of patriarchal norms and cultural expectations.*
- The intersectionality of gender, caste, and class in shaping female experiences.*
- The tension between tradition and modernity in contemporary Indian womanhood.*

Through a critical analysis of literary texts, this research demonstrates how contemporary Indian fiction provides a powerful platform for reimagining and redefining femininity in Indian mythology. By centering the voices and experiences of women, these texts challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative perspectives on Indian womanhood.

Keywords: *Indian Mythology, Femininity, Contemporary Indian Fiction, Female Protagonists, Gender Studies, Indian Womanhood, Patriarchy, Intersectionality, Hindu Mythology.*

Introduction:

Through a critical analysis of the literary text “Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen”, this research demonstrates how contemporary Indian fiction provides a powerful platform for reimagining and redefining femininity in Indian mythology. By centering the voices and experiences of women, these texts challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative perspectives on Indian womanhood.”Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen” (2013), marked a significant shift in Indian mythological fiction, focusing on the often-overlooked

female characters. Indian mythology is a treasure trove of stories, but often, the voices of women are silenced or marginalized. This article will explore how Kavita Kane's novel challenges societal norms through this narrative, reclaiming the divine feminine. This research probes into the intersection of mythology, feminism, and literature. Kane's novel draws from the Mahabharata, the great Indian epic, offering a fresh perspective on mythological women. Kane's works humanize these characters by subverting patriarchal narratives, revealing their complexities. She said, "The feminine is not just about being a woman; it's about being human." (Kane, 2013)

- "Mythology is not just about gods and goddesses; it's about us." (Kane, 2015)

In "Karna's Wife," Kavita Kane compassionately explores Uruvi's journey, subverting traditional portrayals of women and celebrating their agency, resilience, and complexity. Through Uruvi, Kane reminds us that true strength is not solely defined by beauty or status, but by courage, conviction, and compassion. Uruvi's narrative is not just intertwined with Karna; it is a heartfelt exploration of her own struggles and triumphs.

Caste and Class: Reimagining Social Hierarchies

Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* challenges entrenched caste distinctions through the character of Uruvi, a Kshatriya princess who chooses to marry Karna, the son of a charioteer. This union defies the rigid caste structures of their society. The novel portrays Uruvi's love for Karna as an act of rebellion against the societal norms that dictate whom one can love and marry based on caste. The caste system is a pervasive and complex social hierarchy that has shaped Indian society for centuries. In the Mahabharata, the caste system is portrayed as a rigid and unyielding structure, with the Brahmins at the top and the Shudras and Dalits at the bottom. Karna, as a Suta, occupies a liminal space in this hierarchy, facing discrimination and marginalization due to his birth. Despite his lower social status, her decision to marry Karna underscores her defiance of the caste system. As noted in the novel, "Uruvi saw in Karna all the qualities of a hero who was not being permitted to be one" (Kane, 42). This perspective highlights how Uruvi values Karna's virtues over his social standing, challenging the conventional caste-based judgments. Kane emphasizes that mythological women's destinies were subject to the dominant caste and gender ideologies, fostering discriminatory actions, ideologies and beliefs. Through the male protagonists, Kane indicates how incessantly patriarchal structures dominate and exert power over people, especially women, through social conditioning. The text implies women are learning to internalise notions of nobility, caste, and gender conventions in their roles. The society of Hastinapur depicts a caste system and a patriarchally dominated society with considerable power to direct the norms and customs by upper caste men to control lower caste individuals and women. In the landscape of this novel, through Uruvi, Kane explores the complexities of social mobility, highlighting the difficulties faced by individuals who attempt to transcend their caste boundaries.

Marriage and Motherhood: Redefining Identity

Uruvi's journey into marriage and motherhood is depicted as a transformative process that allows her to redefine her identity. Initially, she conforms to the traditional expectations of a wife and mother. However, as the narrative progresses, Uruvi begins to question these roles and seeks to assert her individuality. Her internal conflict is evident when she reflects on her position: "She had to suffer the way people looked at her and Karna, the false sympathy she had to put up with" (Kane, 95). This realization marks a turning point in her character development, where she starts to prioritize her own desires and ambitions over societal expectations.

Identity and Autonomy: The Quest for Selfhood

Uruvi's quest for selfhood is central to her character arc. She navigates the complexities of her identity as a royal woman married to a man of lower social status. Her internal struggles are portrayed with depth, highlighting her desire for autonomy. The narrative delves into her psyche, revealing her feelings of isolation and the challenges she faces in asserting her individuality. As Uruvi contemplates her situation, she muses, "Would it make any difference? In spite of having us, his children and a family that loves him unconditionally, Karna is so remote" (Kane, 173-174). This introspection underscores her yearning for a sense of self beyond her roles as wife and mother.

Gender Roles and Expectations: Navigating Patriarchy

Uruvi's navigation of societal expectations reflects the complexities of gender roles in a patriarchal society. She grapples with the traditional feminine ideals imposed upon her, such as obedience and self-sacrifice. Her relationship with Karna further complicates these roles, as she confronts the conflicting demands of love, loyalty, and self-respect. The novel portrays her internal conflict, showcasing the challenges many women face in balancing personal desires with societal expectations. Uruvi's decision to marry Karna, a suta-putra, is a pivotal moment in her journey, showcasing her feminist stance against patriarchy. This choice is met with resistance from her parents, who embody the patriarchal attitudes prevalent in society. Despite this, Uruvi remains resolute, asserting her agency and autonomy. As G. Beena notes, "Patriarchy as a system oppresses not just women but all marginalized categories. It is in this context that Uruvi's journey represents the spirit of resistance..." (168).

Uruvi's strength lies in her ability to be assertive while remaining polite and soft-spoken. D. Monissha and Dr. SP. Shanthi observe, "Uruvi showed her strength in being polite and remained soft throughout her struggles and insults..." (174). This approach allows her to navigate complex social situations while staying true to her values and choices. In her approach, Uruvi embodies feminist values from an Indo-centric perspective, showcasing a unique blend of traditional values and individual agency. G. Beena describes her as "fearless, honest, assertive, passionate, compassionate and free-spirited, she truly represents feminist values from an Indo-centric perspective with her staunch values for family at the same time pursuing her individual quest for an identity of her own" (170).

War, Duty, and Loyalty: The Burden of Choice

The backdrop of the Mahabharata war serves as a catalyst for Uruvi's emotional and moral dilemmas. She faces the harrowing impact of the war on her life, emphasizing the emotional toll of loyalty and duty. Uruvi finds herself making tough decisions that balance personal sacrifice with responsibility. Her internal turmoil is evident when she contemplates the inevitability of loss: "Karna, each day I live in the fear that I shall lose you" (Kane, 135). This expression of fear underscores the emotional burden she carries as she navigates the complexities of loyalty and duty during the war. Uruvi's confrontation with Krishna and Karna during the rajasuyayajna conducted by Yudhisthira is a pivotal moment in the novel, showcasing her vehement opposition to war and war-mongering as patriarchal and oppressive forces. She questions the ethics of territorial expansion through war and the duties of a King, advocating for peace and prosperity instead. Uruvi's opinions are shaped by her experiences as a woman who has lived with the constant fear of war and its devastating consequences.

War and heroism in war are deeply ingrained patriarchal notions that glorify male aggression and dominance. These notions are rooted in the public sphere, where men engage in battles and are celebrated for their bravery and martial prowess. In contrast, women are relegated to the private sphere, where they bear the

brunt of war's devastating consequences. Uruvi's experiences illustrate the human cost of war, which is often overlooked in the glorification of heroism and martyrdom.

She recounts her childhood experiences, where she was tormented by constant worry about her father's safety in battle. Her mother's experiences are similarly marked by fear and anxiety, illustrating the emotional toll of war on women. Uruvi's words, "I have lived with it all through childhood, tormented by constant worry, and I have seen my mother do the same...the end of war is always terrible. Each time my father went for battle, I lived in the fear that he would not return...and if he had died... What good has war done except give satisfaction to those seeking vain glory?" (Kane, 2013, 102), underscore the futility and horror of war.

Emotional Labor and Mental Health: The Silent Struggle

Uruvi's emotional labor is portrayed as a silent yet significant aspect of her character. She bears the weight of emotional burdens, experiencing anxiety and grief throughout her journey. The novel delves into her internal struggles, highlighting the often-overlooked aspects of emotional labor women perform. Her resilience shines through, serving as an inspiration to others facing similar challenges. As Uruvi reflects on her circumstances, she acknowledges the silent suffering she endures: "She had to suffer the way people looked at her and Karna, the false sympathy she had to put up with" (Kane, 95). This acknowledgment underscores the emotional toll of her experiences. As a woman who defies the traditional norms of her society, Uruvi's journey is marked by her unwavering commitment to her values and her unrelenting pursuit of justice. Her experiences are characterized by the weight of emotional labor, which she carries with remarkable resilience. As a pariah woman married to Karna, a suta-putra, she faces humiliation and dishonor from the members of the royal family and her new in-laws. "It steadily dawned on her that all the ladies she knew were ignoring her Queen Gandhari did not invite her for a formal post-wedding feast.... The aunts and uncles at whose homes she had been accustomed to lunches and family feasts also treated her with frosty disdain" (Karna's Wife 58). Despite this, Uruvi refuses to be defined by her circumstances, instead choosing to rise above them and assert her dignity and self-esteem.

Uruvi's mental health is a testament to her strength and resilience. She navigates the complexities of her relationships with remarkable empathy and understanding, often finding herself at odds with the societal norms that govern her world. Her interactions with Karna, Draupadi, and other characters reveal a deep understanding of the human condition, and her responses to the injustices she witnesses are marked by a profound sense of outrage and compassion. Her experiences were burdened by the iron weight of the Patriarchy, shaped by the patriarchal norms of her society, which dictate the roles and expectations of women. Her defiance of these norms is a testament to her strength and independence, and her commitment to justice and humanity is unwavering. As Debarati Maity notes, "Her indomitable will, empathy for the battered individuals, support and resistance to social injustices... took the rebellion to a much deeper level, to the battleground of conscience and inner precincts of home" (P44).

Kane's Uruvi is antithetical to the other female characters in the novel. She challenges the traditional notion of a woman's identity being defined by her relationships with her pre-marital and post-marital families. According to Kavita Kane, "Uruvi is not just a counterpoint to Draupadi; she is also a contrast to Vrushali, Karna's first wife. Or even Bhanumati, Duryodhan's wife. With Draupadi, there is an ironical parallel, where both eventually have to face a common, terrible reality" (Interview by Mugdha Wagle). Uruvi's character is marked by her ability to rise beyond personal space and advocate for the rights and dignity of others. Her response to Draupadi's public dishonor is a powerful example of this, as she confronts Karna and questions his actions with unflinching courage. "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 proud, great warrior, to strip her of her pride?"

(Karna's Wife 116). Her words are a testament to her unwavering commitment to justice and her refusal to condone wrongdoing, even when it involves the one she loves.

Patriarchal Norms and Resistance: Asserting Agency

Uruvi's resistance to patriarchal norms is a central theme in the novel. She courageously confronts the societal expectations that seek to define her, asserting her agency and embodying a budding feminist consciousness. Her defiance is not loud or overt but is manifested in subtle acts of rebellion that question and disrupt the status quo. In a significant moment, Uruvi challenges the traditional notions of nobility and virtue, stating, "Is Karna a bad man doing good things or is he a good man doing bad things?" (Kane, 62). This rhetorical question reflects her critical examination of societal norms and her willingness to challenge them. Uruvi, as a fictitious character empowered by Kane's brilliant writing craftsmanship, is blazingly scathing, unforgiving, and undocile. She raises questions against all the oppression of Patriarchal norms, and she vehemently defends her husband's honour when he was humiliated and was not allowed to participate in an archery competition against Arjuna. She was unapologetically furious at Bhima when he ridiculed Karna due to his low cast: "How can he ridicule the humble and the helpless? Does that pride and pettiness befit a prince? And why are the elders keeping quiet about this gross insult being heaped upon a defenseless person? Why does Bhishma Pitamaha remain quiet when Bhima is so brutally ridiculing the warrior?" (Kane, 2013, 06)

She proves her Kshatriya blood when she expresses her unforgiving rage and undauntedly questions the reverend people like Bhishma and Kunti about the virtue of her husband, and the denial of Karna's true parentage.

She even pointed a finger at her beloved husband for his moral degradation for not defending a woman's virtue and for being a silent observer with cruel satisfaction. She promotes peace and healing over the glorification of war and martyrdom. And her choice to marry Karna against the social norms of the caste-strata is itself the biggest and the most prominent resistance against Patriarchy. And her decision to continue her suta way of life, refusing to return to Hastinapur even after the death of Karna, makes a statement, a resistance, a protest against a social system that fails to acknowledge a man based on his meritorious deeds and brands his identity based on his birth at end of this novel.

Reclaiming the Feminine: A Postcolonial Feminist Perspective

Karna's Wife reclaims space for the feminine in Indian mythology, often dominated by male narratives. Uruvi's character embodies femininity redefined, emerging as a powerful symbol of women's empowerment. Her narrative reclaims the divine feminine in Indian mythology, challenging patriarchal narratives and promoting gender equality. Through Uruvi's story, Kane offers a postcolonial feminist critique that interrogates colonial legacies and reimagines the roles of women in mythological narratives. As noted in the novel, "Uruvi is a courageous royal woman who does not have notions of discrimination related to caste and creed" (Kane, 42). This portrayal underscores Uruvi's role as a transformative figure who transcends traditional boundaries.

She announced, "Compassion and empathy are the essence of femininity." (Kane, 2013)

Conclusion:

Uruvi's character transcends the boundaries of feminism, embracing a broader humanist perspective. Her experiences and responses are shaped by a deep sense of empathy and compassion, which extends beyond her own identity as a woman. Her commitment to humanity is evident in her interactions with others. She is

not swayed by societal norms or expectations but instead prioritizes the well-being and dignity of individuals. When she says, “It wasn’t Draupadi whom Dushasana was stripping but you!... it was you who was being assaulted, not Draupadi. It was you who was molested, not Draupadi” (Kane, 2013, 119), Uruvi highlights the human cost of violence and injustice, transcending the boundaries of individual identities. Kane offers a powerful reimagining of Indian mythology, reclaiming the divine feminine and challenging patriarchal narratives. Through Uruvi’s character, Kane presents a nuanced exploration of femininity, identity, and agency, highlighting the complexities of women’s experiences in a patriarchal society. By centering Uruvi’s voice and experiences, Kane’s novel provides a fresh perspective on Indian womanhood, one that transcends traditional boundaries and offers a vision of femininity redefined. Ultimately, “Karna’s Wife” contributes to a growing body of literature that seeks to reclaim and reimagine the roles of women in Indian mythology, promoting a more inclusive and equitable understanding of the past. Through its thoughtful exploration of Uruvi’s story, this study contributes to the growing field of feminist and postcolonial scholarship on Indian literature and mythology, offering new insights into the complex and multifaceted nature of Indian femininity and invites readers to reflect on the ongoing struggles and triumphs of women in Indian society, both past and present.

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