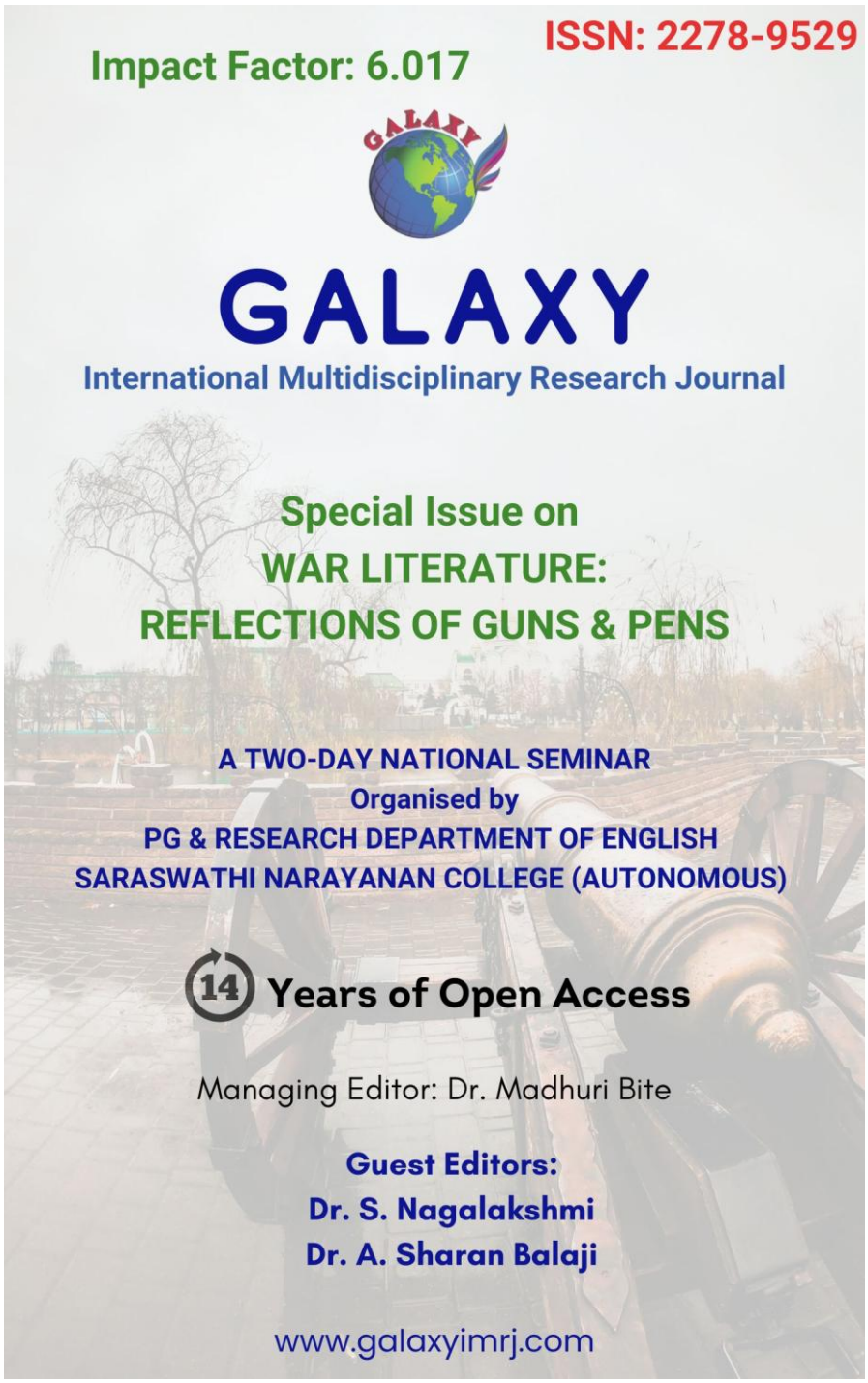


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Kurukshetra Through Her Eyes: Feminist War Narratives in Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*

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Abstract:

Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* revisits the classical Indian epic Mahabharata through the feminist perspective of Uruvi, Karna's wife. This feminist retelling of history and mythology is the trend of the era. Feminist war narratives highlight the experiences and perspectives of women and question traditional national war narratives that are unilateral and partial. As war narratives from ancient to modern times omit women, feminist war narratives advocate for including women's voices in documenting wartime memories that shape the collective understanding of war. This paper examines how Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* challenges the patriarchal glorification of war, reinterprets heroic acts and focuses on the emotional and ethical dilemmas of war from a woman's standpoint. The novel shifts the attention from the veneration of male warriors to the articulation of an unassertive female like Uruvi, giving her a voice to question the morality of war, fate, and duty. Through her empathic eyes, the psychological

and moral dilemmas of war are explored. The human cost of war often overlooked from traditional epics to contemporary times is indeed a pressing issue to be discussed. Criticising heroism, emphasizing personal relationships and empowering women to resist the fatalism of war generate a space for female agency in a male-centred narrative. Further, the paper explores how such feminist revisiting of mythology plays a pivotal role in challenging the cultural memory of the nation regarding the established notions of power, destiny, and agency within traditional narratives.

Keywords: Myth, Epic, Revisionist mythology, Feminist retelling, War, Female agency.

Introduction

The Mahabharata, the epic of ancient India is an unrivalled monarch in the Indian literary landscape that intertwines history, philosophy, ethics, and spirituality. It is a great source for understanding the ancient Indian history. Despite its religious affinity, the information it provides about the different aspects of life of the people of ancient India is valuable. It is the source of historiography of not only India but also for the entire ancient South Asia. In countries such as Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Indonesia, the Mahabharata has influenced important literary works as well as inspired theatrical traditions that are closely tied to their national identities. This longest epic has been retold and adapted countless times over the centuries, paying way to the rise of the new genre Mythological Fiction.

Despite the canonical status, the crucial issue often faced by the greatest epic *Mahabharata* is its lack of female representation. Since the great Kurukshetra War and the fate of the Guru dynasty have been the core of the epic the male heroes and their quest journeys occupy the entire narrative leaving the women characters like Satyavati, Amba, Kunti, and Draupadi to fringes. As

a result, female voices are muted, their sacrifices are ignored and their identities become mysterious. Century after century the readers of the epic are not told in detail about the stories of the female.

According to Roland Barthes 'myth is depoliticized speech' (Barthes 142). To Barthes, myths strip away not only political motifs but also both the social and historical context from the narration. These social, historical or political contexts would reveal the constructed and potentially biased nature of a message that myths carry. Hence myth is created to propose ideologies which consciously or unconsciously, strengthen the power hierarchies within cultural consciousness. Barthes says, "Myth is the most appropriate instrument for the ideological inversion which defines this society: at all the levels of human communication, myth operates the inversion of anti-physis into pseudo-physis" (Barthes 142). Approaching Mahabharata in the sense of Barthes illuminates many grey sides of the classical epic. In India myth is a political medium through which delicate and cultural norms like the concept of dharma, class discrimination and gender subjugation have been communicated with ease to people since the prehistoric period. Through its narratives marginalizing women and lower castes is normalised among people. The sacred association of the myth poses a problem in questioning its mistaken stand even in the 21st century. Themes of gender discrimination, class division, the paradoxical nature of war and the exclusion of women from imaginative narratives are in detail deliberated by Kavita Kane, through her feminist lens. Kane's revision of Mahabharata, through the fictional character Uruvi's perspectives, daringly questions the societal norms which confine their roles as women and allows her to critique the politics, ethics, and human costs of the Kurukshetra war. By reinterpreting the war through Uruvi's lens, Kane challenges the traditional narrative framework, providing an alternative discourse that centres on female agency and emotional depth.

Feminist Reinterpretation of War

The historiography of war or War Literature focuses on examining the causes of war. It often revolves around struggles between empires and colonies, ideological confrontations, civil wars, ethnic and religious disputes and terrorism or asymmetrical warfare. Violence against women during wars has been deliberately silenced throughout the world since ancient times. Subsequently, their experiences and the trauma of war remain erased from official history and unspoken in literature. From the ancient epic to modern graphic narratives, women have not only been sexually assaulted in the wars but also, suffer from the trauma of loss. However, in the present era, "writers, ethnographers and critics have become conscious of the need to represent women in narratives" (Biswas and Tripathi). Kane's revisiting presents Uruvi as an active contributor in all the spears of life including the socio-political discourse of her time that is silenced in traditional narratives. The conventional portrayal of women resists women's participation in socio-political engagement, particularly in warfare. But in Kane's reimagining, the protagonist Uruvi questions the morality of war dharma, the glorification of duty, and the rigid social norms placed on men and women. *The Mahabharata* is deeply rooted in the ideologies like dharma (duty) and karma (destiny). Uruvi's character offers an alternative perspective to these ideologies aiming to reconstruct. The heroes of the epic blindly adhere to fate often accepting it as an inevitable force and preordained. Particularly Karna's unwavering loyalty to Duryodhana despite the evident consequences, men of wisdom such as Bhishma and Dronacharya knowingly endorse injustice and Arjuna's participation in war despite his moral dilemmas, due to his duty as a warrior exemplifies the failure of men to defy war. Karna agreed gravely that Bhima is his eternal opponent in mace warfare. The hate runs much deeper into his mind. Kane contrasts Uruvi's questioning of war and hatred as a necessity and an expression of valour with the male characters' acceptance of violence

as their inevitable fate. This revision compels the reader to reconsider the romanticization of war which asserts that war is meant to establish justice. The modern reader of the epic begins to question whether war is truly a means of justice or merely a cyclical tragedy driven by ego and revenge Kane's commitment to voicing these concerns marks a significant shift in how mythological fiction can serve as a feminist critique and shape the cultural memory of the nation. This feminist reinterpretation of the epic battle ensures the consequences of war beyond the battlefield.

Uruvi's Perspective: A Feminist Reimagining

Uruvi is a beloved little angel to all the royal families. The members of the neighbouring kingdoms were attracted by her cuteness, audacity and ready-wittedness. Even the Bishma Pithamaha always adored her and kept her on his lap and presented a basket of freshly plucked jasmines at her visit to Hastinapur. Even Gandhari, the blindfolded Queen was not spared by her. Uruvi enquires about her blindfold "Why do you wear that she added further Do you like to play blind man's buff with Uncle? You should remove the fold and help him with instead! Thus the child made Gandhari who rarely laugh, giggle and hung her." (Kane 243). Uruvi's question to Gandhari about her blindfold and her suggestion to remove it challenge the traditional, passive role that women often play in patriarchal settings. Gandhari, as a character, represents the epitome of female submission, symbolized by her blindfold, which she wears out of loyalty and obedience to her husband, Dhritarashtra. The blindfold, in this sense, symbolizes both her literal and metaphorical blindness to the realities around her and her lack of agency. Uruvi's playful and bold interaction with Gandhari makes her laugh which throws light on the character Gandhari. It is significant in the context of Gandhari's character because, in traditional mythological stories, she rarely laughs. Laughter, from a feminist perspective, is often seen as a form of agency and

liberation. Uruvi's ability to make Gandhari laugh is significant because it offers a moment of relief from the burdens of tradition and expectation that weigh heavily on Gandhari. Uruvi's playful yet pointed intervention represents a more modern or progressive view on gender roles compared to Gandhari's adherence to older traditions. Uruvi's boldness contrasts with Gandhari's subdued compliance, suggesting that feminist perspectives and approaches to gender can evolve. Feminist scholars Chandra Talpade Mohanty discuss how women's experiences with patriarchy may differ across cultures, generations and historical contexts. Uruvi represents a younger generation that seeks to break away from entrenched gender norms.

Uruvi admired her father a lot. She tried to learn Mathematics and astronomy like her father. She failed in her efforts to do so. Her mother advised her to learn music and art. She was an excellent artist of the beauty of nature. She developed a passion for green plants and herbs. She was talented in horse riding. Unlike other princess, she went to Rishi Bagola's Gurukul and a new horizon of Ayurveda and Healing was opened to her. Rishi Bagola wondered to find in Uruvi, a rare gift of curing the diseased and injured people by her kind approach. Her merciful words and soft touch worked wonders beyond medicine. Soon she was found nursing the wounded soldiers on the battle field. She developed hatred towards the wars. Her rebellious attitude could be identified when she argued with her father about the consequences of war. She asked her father when he indulged in war:

> 'Is this the fruit of war?' she once asked her father disconsolately. 'How can you feel so triumphant when you have hurt and killed so many? How can you gloat about your victory while trampling on other people's lives? What is it—insatiability, egotism, or self-importance—that goads you to go to war?'
>
> (Kane 23)

In the early years of her life, Uruvi despised war and warlords. Uruvo's uprising against her father's role in war highlights her denial of violence, which often suspiciously distresses women and children. Her questioning of her father's participation in war replicates and the rebellious princess's empathy for the war victims offers a critique of the male-dominated decision-making processes that lead to conflict.

The Emotional Cost of Kurukshetra

In *Karna's Wife*, the narratives move away from the typical glorification of war. Mythological wars are presented with majestic, highlighting the valour associated with battle. The strategic planning for the war is described meticulously and the warriors engaged in the battle are treated as great heroes. Kane also But in the novel the main focus of the narration is presenting the emotional and psychological costs of war, especially for women. The emotional toll on the families is described as:

> The last few days before the war passed slowly. The entire household at the Anga palace was uneasy, the dark future looming ahead threateningly. Karna, Vrushali, Shona Radha, Adhiratha and the sons of Karna were like victims being prepared for the savage rites of a sacrifice. (Kane 256)

Through Uruvi's eyes, the psychological toll of war on families and women is highlighted. Before the war unfolds, the people in the Anga palace, Vrushali and Radha, as Karna's wife and mother, the father, the sons and the other members of Karna's household are described as victims. Though they do not engage in the battle directly they too bear its consequences. Cynthia Enloe, an American political theorist, and a towering figure in the field of feminist geopolitics, in her book *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (1989) argues that women's roles in war is mere caregivers, mourners, or displaced victim (Enloe). The torment of Uruvi over

Karna's fate is echoed in her interactions with Karna. The narratives of grief and resilience are entirely overlooked in traditional epics. Honour and duty are the two driving forces of Karna and adhering to them is considered a masculine virtue. Uruvi is left to deal with the consequences of his choices. Her pain is not just personal but representative of the collective suffering of women who lose their husbands, sons and fathers to war. Her reaction to Abhimanyu's death highlights the stark contrast between the ideals of heroism and the devastating realities of violence. When she questions the brutality of war Uruvi's moral conflict and emotional turmoil echo:

> Uruvi was filled with dismay. When she met Karna at the end of the day, she asked him sadly, 'How could you, as a decent human being, a noble warrior yourself, kill Abhimanyu in that merciless way?' Her heart cried out more in revulsion than in pain. 'He was but a child, a little older than our Vrishakethu. All you great warriors pounced on him like wild animals! I knew war was a killer, but does it turn men into such hideous fiends?' (Kane 272)

Through presenting the unease and impending doom faced by women, Kane offers a powerful critique of war. Kane's narratives assert that the Kurukshetra war was born out of hatred and inflicted unimaginable tragedy upon the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Kane's descriptions of the alliances in the Kurukshetra war drive the 21st-century reader to vividly envision the sheer terror and devastation of war. The depiction points out that the kingdoms of Dwarka, Kasi, Magadha, Matsya, Chedi, Pandya, Yadus and Kamboja supported the Pandavas. Anga, the kings of Pragjyotisha, Kekaya, Sindhudesa, Mahishmati, Madra and Avanti in Madhyadesa joined the Kauravas, while the Kambojas, Gandharas, Bahlikas, Yavanas, Sakas and Tusharas also backed them. The portrayal of rival forces in the Kurukshetra War "The mere sight of four million soldiers facing each other on the battlefield at Kurukshetra struck terror in the people of the Kuru kingdom

who waited fearfully for the war to begin." (Kane 266) mirrors First and Second World war coalitions. Kane effectively conveys the horrors of war, particularly through vivid evocative imagery like "Strangers killed strangers, brothers slaughtered brothers, cousins murdered cousins, uncles killed nephews and nephews massacred uncles." (Kane 266). The description of animals scavenging on the dead brings a layer of rawness and the brutal dehumanizing nature of the war. The breakdown of moral order which is routine of the war is portrayed, conveying the horrifying consequences of the Kurukshetra War.

Conclusion:

Kavita Kane's seminal mythological fiction, Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen offer an alternative retelling of the Indian classical epic Mahabharata. The depiction of Kurukshetra war through Uruvi's eyes shifts the focus from battleground heroism to the emotional, ethical and social implications of war and starkly highlights the unfathomable horrors of war. Kane's feminist war narrative is indeed compelling which drives Uruvi to play an active role in questioning war, duty, and fate which are disdained in traditional epics that primarily focus on male warriors and their battles, sidelining women's voices. The anguish, grief, and ethical dilemmas of the protagonist Uruvi probe into the moral and emotional complexities often overlooked in the original epic and highlight the human cost of war.

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