

Reclaiming Agency: Women's Narratives in *Karna's Wife*

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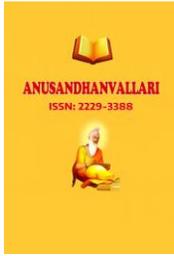
Abstract

Kavita Kane is an Indian author known for her feminist retellings of Hindu mythology. A former journalist, she gained recognition with her debut novel, *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. This paper entitled **Reclaiming Agency: Women's Narratives in *Karna's Wife*** explores the theme of female agency in *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. The novel reimagines the Mahabharata through the perspective of Uruvi, Karna's wife. By shifting the focus from the dominant male narratives of the epic, the novel offers a nuanced portrayal of Uruvi as an assertive and independent woman who challenges societal norms while navigating love, loyalty, and personal convictions. Drawing from feminist literary criticism, this study examines how Uruvi's voice reclaims agency within a patriarchal framework, redefining her role beyond that of a silent consort. It further investigates how her choices, dialogues, and resistance to traditional constraints contribute to a broader discourse on women's empowerment in mythological retellings. In doing so, the paper highlights the significance of reinterpreting classical texts through contemporary feminist lenses to uncover marginalized voices and reframe historical narratives.

Key words: female agency, patriarchy, redefining, resistance, marginalised.

Feminism is a socio-political and literary movement that advocates for gender equality and challenges the patriarchal structures that have historically oppressed women. It seeks to redefine gender roles, question traditional power dynamics, and promote women's rights in all aspects of life. The movement has evolved through different waves, each focusing on distinct issues and expanding the discourse on women's empowerment. The first wave of feminism, emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was primarily concerned with legal rights, particularly women's suffrage. Thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), argued for women's education and intellectual equality, John Stuart Mill, in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), advocated for women's rights in marriage and society. This wave achieved significant victories, such as securing women's right to vote in several countries.

Feminism continues to evolve, challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for equal rights in literature, politics, and society. It continues to be a powerful force in reinterpreting history, literature, and culture through a gendered lens. As feminist thought evolves, it persistently reshapes perspectives on power, identity, and representation across academic and popular discourse. Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife* presents a feminist reinterpretation of the Mahabharata by giving a strong, independent voice to Uruvi, a character absent from traditional versions of the epic. Through Uruvi and other female characters, the novel challenges patriarchal norms, critiques gender roles, and reclaims women's agency in a historically male-centric narrative.



Uruvi is depicted as an educated, outspoken, and self-willed woman who chooses Karna over the Kshatriya prince Arjuna, defying societal expectations of caste and class. Her defiance aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* (1949) that women are often defined as "the Other" in patriarchal societies, expected to conform to traditional roles (267). By making her own choices and confronting male dominance, Uruvi embodies early feminist resistance. Uruvi, the daughter of King Vahusha and Queen Shubra, is naughty and defiant but not disobedient. Though a princess, she falls in love with Karna, who faces discrimination as a charioteer's son. Her father tries to convince her that it is against the norms of the society to marry a pratiloma, a man of lower caste. She is firm in her decision. She says, "I will give myself to him," she spoke with such simplicity, so much earnestness, that her self-surrender was touching, leaving her father overwhelmed. Eventually, he had to bow to her wishes" (22).

Additionally, her moral agency challenges the epic's portrayal of women as passive figures. She consistently questions Karna's loyalty to Duryodhana, opposes his role in Draupadi's humiliation, and engages in political discourse, breaking the silence of a submissive wife. She questions him:

Did it make you feel you 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? Did it make you feel powerful, great warrior, to disrobe her? To deride her as a prostitute? Did it make you feel happy to hear her beg and weep? What sort of a man are you? She cried. How could you do what you did? (116).

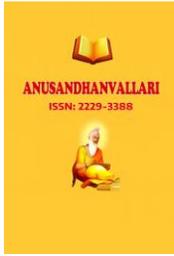
She accuses his wrong sense of obligation to his friend Duryodhana, knowing well that his evil intentions have no limits. She despises him for deceiving himself and for having let himself down. This aligns with Bell Hooks' view, which advocates for "women's active participation in power structures" (54).

While Draupadi is often seen as a tragic victim in the Mahabharata, *Karna's Wife* gives her a more complex and layered persona. She is not just a pawn in male rivalries but a strong-willed woman grappling with injustice. When she is humiliated in the court of Hastinapura and Uruvi seeks pardon on behalf of Karna, Draupadi states, "You need not be sorry, I am ready to fight back! I have to, my determination is my lifeline. It's my sustenance!" (125). The novel subtly suggests her possible regret over rejecting Karna and her hidden emotions.

Draupadi knew that though she loved Karna, she could never marry him. She had been to the consort of Arjuna, the favourite disciple of Dronacharya, her father's arch-enemy. By choosing to marry Arjuna, she had unwittingly offered herself as the wager in the political crossfire between the Kauravas, the Pandavas and the Pachals. Or was which subvert the traditional portrayal of Draupadi's unwavering devotion to her five husbands. (134)

When Uruvi sobs, Draupadi comforts her and asks her not to torment herself but to reconcile with him, she thought that Karna would help her but she also accepts it as a retaliation for the insult during the swayamwara, she added, "But I am not angry with him. He insulted me in a moment of heat! love knows how to forgive. Love is blind – to faults, to flaws. You are fortunate to have him . . . keep him, don't lose him" (135). Draupadi almost confessed her feelings for Karna. Virginia Woolf's argument in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) that "women's stories have been largely told through male perspectives" (78) resonates with Draupadi's reimagined agency in Kane's novel. Draupadi is not just a victim but an individual with emotional complexity, highlighting how feminist retellings reshape existing narratives to empower women. Uruvi boldly challenges both Duryodhana and Kunti, two powerful figures, showcasing her outspoken defiance against patriarchal control. She confronts Duryodhana's toxic masculinity, openly condemning his treatment of Draupadi and his manipulation of Karna.

Similarly, she confronts Kunti over her past choices, questioning why women are expected to endure suffering silently. This aligns with Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which argues that "gender roles



are enforced through social norms and power structures” (25). Uruvi’s defiance against predefined roles for women in the epic challenges traditional notions of femininity, making her a subversive figure in mythological retellings.

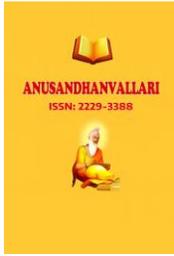
Uruvi’s grief after Karna’s death is not just personal—it is a symbolic critique of how patriarchal systems lead to women’s suffering. Unlike traditional epic narratives where grieving women are passive, Uruvi’s sorrow is intertwined with anger, defiance, and resistance. She does not simply accept fate but questions the injustices that led to Karna’s downfall. In Adrienne Rich’s feminist critique, grief can be “a form of resistance” (92). Uruvi’s mourning is an act of defiance against a system that perpetuates violence and injustice, reinforcing the idea that women’s emotions hold political significance.

Karna’s Wife reimagines the Mahabharata through a feminist lens, offering a narrative where women are not sidelined but actively shape their destinies. Uruvi, Draupadi, and Kunti challenge societal expectations, patriarchal power, and traditional portrayals of femininity. Through feminist theory, Kane’s novel reclaims lost voices, proving that mythology is not static but a dynamic space for gender reinterpretation and empowerment. Kavita Kane’s *Karna’s Wife* offers a feminist reinterpretation of the Mahabharata by presenting the story from the perspective of Uruvi, a woman absent from the original epic. Uruvi is not just Karna’s wife but an independent thinker who challenges societal norms, making her a strong feminist figure. Kane’s novel aligns with Elaine Showalter’s gynocriticism, which emphasizes the need for literature written by women to be analysed based on female experiences rather than male-centric frameworks. Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), states, “Gynocritics begin at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history” (12). Uruvi’s narrative disrupts the traditional patriarchal storytelling by questioning Karna’s blind loyalty to Duryodhana and engaging in confrontations with figures like Kunti and Duryodhana, something unheard of for women in the original epic.

Uruvi’s defiance also reflects Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of “The Other” from *The Second Sex* (1949). De Beauvoir argues that women are historically treated as secondary to men, their identities shaped by male dominance rather than their desires. “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (283) applies directly to Uruvi, who refuses to let her identity be defined solely as Karna’s wife. Unlike Draupadi, who is torn between duty and honor, Uruvi openly challenges societal conventions, choosing Karna over the Kshatriya elite and questioning the moral choices of the men around her.

While Uruvi represents an outspoken feminist voice, Kunti’s struggles embody liberal feminism—a belief that women should have equal rights within existing social structures. Kunti, despite being a queen, is constrained by patriarchal norms, forced to abandon her firstborn son and later remain silent about his true identity. Her silence mirrors the “problem with no name” that Betty Friedan describes in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963): “The feminine mystique has succeeded in burying millions of women alive” (15). Like many women in mythology, Kunti is confined to a role that restricts her agency, highlighting the limitations imposed on women even in positions of power.

Karna’s Wife is a powerful feminist revision of the Mahabharata, offering a fresh perspective on female agency, emotion, and intellect. Through Uruvi, Kane shows how women navigate and resist patriarchal structures. Kane not only revives lost voices but also challenges traditional narratives of myth. Her work serves as a contribution to feminist retellings of mythology, proving that epic narratives are not static but evolve with changing societal consciousness.



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