



## REWRITING THE MARGINS: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF KAVITA KANE'S KARNA'S WIFE: THE OUTCAST'S QUEEN

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### Abstract:

Mythological retellings in contemporary Indian English literature have emerged as significant sites for reinterpreting canonical narratives from the perspectives of marginalized characters. Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* exemplifies this trend by relocating the narrative focus from the celebrated heroes of the *Mahabharata* to Uruvi and Karna, whose lives are shaped by caste prejudice, social exclusion, and patriarchal power. This paper examines the novel through a postcolonial lens, arguing that Kane's rewriting of the epic functions as a counter-narrative that interrogates dominant structures of authority and challenges the ideological hierarchies embedded within traditional mythological discourse. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Edward Said, and Ranajit Guha, the study explores how the novel reconfigures concepts of identity, otherness, marginality, and resistance. Karna's persistent exclusion despite his exceptional abilities reflects the politics of social othering, while Uruvi's independent choices and critical engagement with patriarchal norms foreground female agency within an epic traditionally governed by male perspectives. By repositioning these marginalized figures at the centre of the narrative, Kane contests inherited notions of legitimacy, power, and social privilege, thereby transforming the epic into a space of ideological negotiation.

**Key Words:** Patriarchal Power, Hierarchy, Mythology, Marginalized, Caste Prejudice.

### Introduction:

Contemporary Indian English literature has witnessed a remarkable resurgence of mythological retellings that revisit canonical epics through the perspectives of marginalized and overlooked characters. Rather than reproducing the authoritative narratives of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, these retellings interrogate dominant ideologies by foregrounding voices traditionally excluded from epic discourse. Authors such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anand Neelakantan, Devdutt Pattanaik, and Kavita Kane employ myth as a critical medium to explore contemporary concerns related to gender, caste, identity, and power. Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013) exemplifies this narrative shift by reimagining epic history through Uruvi's perspective. Uruvi's assertion "I chose Karna, not his caste, not his birth, but the man he is" (87) directly challenges the epistemology of inherited hierarchy. This act of choice becomes a postcolonial gesture of resistance against socially constructed identity. Edward Said's concept of representation is useful here, as Karna is repeatedly constructed as the "outsider" whose identity is defined not by selfhood but by social discourse. Said argues that "representation is not a natural reflection but a structured discourse of power" (21). Karna's marginalization reflects this discursive construction of otherness.

### Literature Review:

Mythological retellings have become an important area of scholarship within Indian English literature because they reinterpret classical narratives in response to contemporary social realities. Critics argue that these narratives dismantle patriarchal authority by granting agency to female characters who occupy marginal positions in canonical texts. In Kane's novel, Uruvi's voice disrupts epic silence when she declares, "I will not be a shadow in a man's story; I will be the light in my own" (142). This assertion aligns with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's argument that the subaltern is often denied speech within dominant discourse. Spivak famously asks, "Can the subaltern speak?" (104), suggesting that even when marginalized figures appear to speak, their voices are mediated by dominant structures. However, Kane partially revises this condition by allowing Uruvi narrative agency, thereby challenging the silencing mechanisms described by Spivak.

Karna's characterization in *Karna's Wife* foregrounds the politics of otherness by exposing how caste-based prejudice determines social identity more powerfully than individual merit. Although Karna possesses exceptional martial skill, generosity, and moral integrity, he remains stigmatized because of his presumed low birth. His repeated humiliation reveals that exclusion is institutional rather than personal, sustained through social and ideological structures that privilege lineage over ability. Karna's painful realization that "Even friendship cannot erase the stain of my birth" (Kane 118) underscores the permanence of caste discrimination despite Duryodhana's patronage. This experience resonates with Edward Said's argument that "the Other is produced through systems of knowledge and power" (40), suggesting that Karna's identity is constructed not by his own achievements but by dominant social discourse. Kane demonstrates that caste functions as a mechanism of symbolic violence, preventing Karna from attaining full social legitimacy regardless of his accomplishments. In contrast, Uruvi emerges as a powerful counter-narrative that challenges these entrenched hierarchies through ethical resistance. Her declaration, "If love is rebellion, then I choose to rebel" (Kane 95), transforms her marriage to Karna into a deliberate rejection of caste orthodoxy rather than an act of personal romance. Her resistance reflects Homi K. Bhabha's concept of negotiation, wherein subversion occurs from

within dominant cultural structures instead of through direct confrontation. Uruvi's critique extends beyond caste to the patriarchal glorification of war, as she insists, "Glory built on blood is no glory at all" (Kane 176). By privileging compassion, justice, and human dignity over martial valor, she destabilizes the epic's conventional ideals of heroism and masculinity. Through the intertwined experiences of Karna and Uruvi, Kane reimagines the *Mahabharata* from the perspective of the marginalized, revealing that true heroism lies not in social privilege or military conquest but in resisting oppressive structures that define and silence the "Other."

### **Rewriting Myth as Postcolonial Resistance:**

Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife* reimagines the *Mahabharata* as a postcolonial counter-history by recovering voices that remain marginalized in the canonical epic. Rather than privileging celebrated heroes such as Arjuna and Krishna, Kane shifts the narrative center to Karna and Uruvi, thereby challenging the ideological authority of the traditional epic. This narrative displacement questions whose stories are remembered and whose experiences are erased from cultural memory. Karna's observation, "History belongs to the victors, not the silenced" (Kane 201), encapsulates the novel's critique of dominant historical narratives that celebrate power while suppressing the experiences of the marginalized. His statement closely aligns with Ranajit Guha's contention that conventional historiography has largely been written from the perspective of elites, leaving subaltern agency unacknowledged. Kane's revision of myth thus becomes an act of historical reclamation, enabling those excluded from authoritative narratives to articulate their own experiences of suffering, dignity, and resistance. This strategy also reflects Homi K. Bhabha's understanding of postcolonial writing as "the interruption of historical continuity" (54), whereby inherited narratives are disrupted to create space for alternative histories and identities. Instead of presenting the *Mahabharata* as a fixed and unquestionable cultural text, Kane transforms it into a dynamic site of contestation where memory, justice, and identity are renegotiated. Through this revisionary approach, *Karna's Wife* demonstrates that myth can function not merely as cultural inheritance but as a powerful medium for interrogating structures of caste, power, and historical exclusion, ultimately restoring visibility and agency to those long relegated to the margins.

### **Caste, Gender, and Identity:**

*Karna's Wife* presents caste and gender as deeply interconnected structures of oppression that shape the identities, choices, and destinies of its central characters. Karna's exclusion from the Kshatriya order is determined not by his extraordinary abilities but by the stigma attached to his perceived birth, illustrating how caste functions as an enduring system of social control. Likewise, Uruvi's experiences reveal that patriarchal norms seek to regulate women's agency by defining obedience as their highest virtue. Rejecting these expectations, Uruvi firmly asserts, "A woman is not born to obey, but to understand and choose" (Kane 133). This declaration transforms her from a passive participant in the epic into an autonomous moral subject who challenges both patriarchal authority and caste orthodoxy. Her decision to marry Karna despite intense social opposition demonstrates that resistance can emerge through ethical conviction and personal choice rather than overt rebellion. Uruvi's assertion resonates with postcolonial feminist critiques that expose how gender and caste reinforce one another to sustain unequal power relations. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of the subaltern is particularly illuminating in this context, as both Karna and Uruvi occupy marginalized positions within dominant social structures. Karna's voice is continually delegitimized because of caste prejudice, while Uruvi's opinions are dismissed because she is a woman who refuses to conform to patriarchal expectations. Their attempts to articulate justice, dignity, and equality are constrained by institutions that privilege lineage, masculinity, and political authority. As Spivak argues, "the subaltern cannot speak" (308), not because speech is impossible, but because structures of power prevent marginalized voices from being recognized or heard. By foregrounding the experiences of Karna and Uruvi, Kane challenges these mechanisms of silencing and reclaims their narratives as acts of resistance, demonstrating that identity is not merely inherited through caste or gender but actively negotiated through courage, ethical choice, and the struggle for self-definition.

### **Conclusion:**

Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* successfully reinterprets the *Mahabharata* through a postcolonial framework that foregrounds marginality, resistance, and the reconstruction of identity. By centering the experiences of Karna and Uruvi rather than the celebrated heroes of the epic, Kane challenges dominant historical and cultural narratives that have traditionally privileged power, lineage, and patriarchy. Karna's struggle against caste-based exclusion and Uruvi's defiance of patriarchal expectations collectively reveal how social identities are constructed through systems of hierarchy and exclusion rather than individual merit or moral worth. In reclaiming these marginalized perspectives, the novel transforms myth into a powerful medium for interrogating caste discrimination, gender inequality, and the politics of historical representation. Edward Said's assertion that "texts are sites of struggle over meaning" (45) aptly illuminates Kane's revisionary project, for *Karna's Wife* contests the ideological assumptions embedded within the canonical epic and opens it to alternative interpretations rooted in justice and equality. The novel demonstrates that myths are not static cultural artifacts but dynamic narratives continually reshaped by changing historical, political, and ethical perspectives. Through this act of narrative intervention, Kane restores visibility to voices silenced by dominant discourse and reimagines heroism as an ethical commitment to dignity, compassion, and resistance rather than military triumph or inherited privilege. Consequently, *Karna's Wife* stands as a significant contribution to contemporary mythological fiction, illustrating how the rewriting of myth can function as an act of postcolonial resistance that questions hegemonic structures, recovers subaltern histories, and affirms that cultural memory remains a contested and continuously evolving space.

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