

UNVEILING THE DOUBLY MARGINALISED: A FEMINIST READING OF KAVITA KANE'S *KARNA'S WIFE AND SITA'S SISTER*

*Vidhya Vijayan, Guest Lecturer, Department of English, N. S. S. Hindu College,
Perunna, Changanacherry, Kottayam, Kerala*

Abstract:

The article titled 'Unveiling the Doubly Marginalized: A Feminist Reading of Kavita Kane's Karna's Wife and Sita's Sister' explores the psyche of two characters Uruvi and Urmila respectively. Uruvi, hitherto neglected character, gains proper attention in the novel Karna's wife. Urmila, the most disregarded character, becomes the central character in the novel Sita's Sister. Through a re-visioned myth making technique, Kane presents Uruvi and Urmila as defiant characters who raise their voices against the dominating patriarchal discourse. In Karna's Wife there occurs a re-view of unfairness and subordination in relation to gender and caste done by the upper class Pandavas along with the great male icons to Uruvi and others. By fitting Uruvi into the mould of modern new woman, Kane exposes the cruelties done by Pandavas to the female figures like Uruvi, Kunti, Vrushali. Whereas in Sita's Sister, Kane has given Urmila a well-built feminine identity and presents her as one making use of the feminine power in her to express her opinions and make decisions in favour of women in a patriarchal society.

Key words: *Psyche, re-vision, patriarchy, subordination, discourse.*

Critiquing the prominent patriarchal domination is one of the major concerns of Indian women writers. The two novels of Kavita Kane reveal her concern and strong passion towards the bold women characters in mythic tradition. Kane like other women writers of the modern period presents female protagonists as bold enough to break away the fetters over them and also throw-outs the stereotypical traditions in which women play passive roles. Kane introduces the novel *Karna's Wife* and *Sita's Sister* through the technique of revisionist story telling. Revision simply means re-visioning the entire novel from another one's point of view here this happens from the feminist angle. Here the author reconstructs the images of women in a different way. Simply it is an attempt to retrieve female identity from the oppressive phallogocentric language. Many contemporary women writers have made great effort in re-constructing the well-established myth structures. Myth is a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being or hero or event which comes down from history that has an accepted meaning in our society. Here the author Kavita Kane, a true blue Punetite appropriates the myth and assigns new meaning to it through her novels *Karna's wife* and *Sita's Sister*.

Myth, the patriarchal language, always subjugates women. Ever since the story of *Genesis* came out women were treated as being created out of man. By reconstructing the epic Mahabharata and Ramayana respectively, Kane sabotages this patriarchal language and brings Uruvi (Karna's wife) and Urmila (Sita's sister) to the surface level to fight with the evils of male dominated society. In the above mentioned epics, both of these characters have no significant role, whereas in *Karna's wife* and *Sita's Sister* they play the major role. Kane's Uruvi and Urmila question the discriminations of the royal society and act against the differences in variant ways. Unlike Vyasa's and Valmiki's characters, Kane's protagonists question the discrimination of the royal society towards subservient people. Uruvi's act of breaking the fetters goes to an extent of selecting groom from an outcaste without minding the protest from different angles. Urmila, apart from Sita, very actively fight against the odds in a male chauvinist society.

The legendary epic writers have never given any special consideration in bringing the characters Uruvi and Urmila to limelight though they have done many daring deeds during their life time. The novel *Karna's Wife*, told from Uruvi's point of view, unfolds against the backdrop of the epic struggle between the Pandavas and Kauravas. It is a moving story of love against all odds. In *Karna's Wife* she portrays the female protagonist Uruvi as a rebellious character who raises their voices against male dominations, foolish conventions, political and social restrictions and cultural backwardness.

Karna's wife is definitely a feminist writing in which myths are re-visioned, rewrote and re-told from a female point of view. Here the author focuses on a character that is hitherto neglected by the readers. The title *Karna's wife: The Outcast's Queen* reveals the protagonist as doubly marginalized, first as a woman and second as an outcast. Uruvi, unlike other passive female characters, raises her voice against the patriarchal society and interrogates every false notion bravely. Kane makes a deep probe into the psyche of Uruvi and presents her as a formidable character who challenges the stereotypical clichéd norms of society.

It is a re-view of discrimination and subordination in relation to gender and caste. According to Adrienne Rich: "Re-vision the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival" (18). The novelist Kane adopts this strategy to present before the readers a strong Uruvi. She looks back into the history to fill the new bottle with old wine. Under the guise of a mythical fantasy Kane analyses the different realms of a female mind. Unlike other characters, Uruvi is presented as strong enough to raise her voice against the misdeeds of man, including her husband's. Kane's portrayal of Uruvi as an aggressive one is really tricky. Her belligerence seems to be a real threat against man's power and superiority. Here she brings out a new kind of meaning to womanhood. In patriarchal society there is a mistaken belief that the curses of womanhood lies in the blind acceptance of the inequality imposed on the women. She shatters this view and upholds the notion that women should be given equal voice, equal opportunity and equal place like the man. She struggles against all the odds that come in the form of injustice against both women as well as the outcasts. The novelist presents her an incarnation of women's pride, sharp intellect and strong will. Kane brings to the surface the broader and deeper aspect of Uruvi's mind.

Kane portrays Uruvi very realistically by unfolding the different facets of her life. Kane introduces the character Uruvi as: "The spirited daughter had inherited her mother's glorious beauty and her father's sharp mind, and both sizzled in her short flashes of temper" (9). Uruvi, the princess, who has enjoyed the pride of an elite class, enters into an extremely opposite realm after her marriage with Karna. Uruvi as a single child has enjoyed the freedom in its all sense. Though the reader feels the character as an arrogant one, it is her arrogance in inquiring the patriarchy makes her a strong woman as well as a powerful character. Kane presents her as bold and an arrogant woman who is very much efficient in interrogating every false notions, conventional styles, and patriarchal rules.

In *Mahabharata*, Uruvi's desire for Karna is depicted as a mere infatuation. But Kane interprets it in different way. Uruvi's desire for Karna cannot be viewed as a fleeting infatuation of evanescent period. Uruvi the pampered princess of Pukeya, loved Karna whom most people treated with great scorn. In Kane's language it is her boldness that tempted her to fall in love with an outcast, by challenging the royal society and also knowing the every possible outcome. Uruvi shows an inclination towards her father more than towards her mother. The admiration towards her father prompts her to be like him both in talents and masculinity. She tried her best in converting herself into a daring princess who can be equated with other princes like Arjuna, Bhima... Her competence is showed in the following lines: "While girls of her age were groomed to become dainty princesses, princess Uruvi saddled her horse each morning to ride to the Gurukul where she spent the day immersed in the world of medicinal herbs and other remedies". (15) King Vahusha, the typical father considered her daughter a precious gem really becomes helpless at his daughter's decision in marrying an outcast, Karna. When Uruvi boldly reveals her intention to either marry

Karna or remain unmarried, King Vahusha directs her decision by reminding her of the social consciousness. He says: "Society will not permit me to keep you unmarried, nor will it allow you to marry a charioteer's son. You can't marry a half caste" (18). The words reflect not merely an anxious father but a system of patriarchal thought which is always resistant to change.

In *Karna's Wife*, Uruvi greatly condemns the caste consciousness of the Kshatriya clans by bringing out their different ritual practices. For them marrying a man of lower caste, 'pratiloma' (19) is prohibited by the *shastras*. At first, King Vahusha who is totally dissatisfied with his daughter's decision to marry Karna, the low caste, later changes his decision when he is dominated by the paternal instinct in him. He also follows the same righteous path of her daughter which is against the foolish customs and family pride. When her mother warns her against the plight of her future life, she lashes out against her and says strongly that she will be comfortable with Karna. Her audacity reveals again when she questions the handing over of Kunti, by her father king Sura, to Kuntibhoja, his cousin who is childless. She shows the readiness to question the paternity for this matter. She flaunts her parents by saying that if she were in Kunti's place, she would be furious and definitely question her father that for committing such a cruel act. To quote "I would have been furious how dare he" (26).

By using the mythical framework of *Mahabharata* Kane tries to give voice to another sacrificial lady character who was also victimized in the patriarchal hegemony. Through the portrayal of the character of Kunti, Kane brings out the tragic picture of her who has lost everything including her own identity, name, father, husband, kingdom, and pleasures. To prove how much a woman has suffered at the hands of patriarchy, Kane introduces before us the victim Kunti. Like every woman she also wants to lead a happy life with her husband. But she has to keep all the pleasures away from her married life. The greatness as well as the sufferings of Kunti is described in a brilliant way by the novelist "Kunti who would have preferred to have died with her husband but lived to be a mother not just to her sons but to the infant sons of Madri as well Kunti, the queen mother, who in an instant, became a king's widow without a kingdom" (27). Uruvi is commanding and candid, and hence she declares her affection towards Kunti without further delay. She is portrayed as a very passionate and practical character with obstinacy in her attitude. Though the royal princesses are forbidden many pleasures in their life, the real freedom they have enjoyed is their own swayamvara in which the prospective bride is given the freedom to decide her life partner. Uruvi voluntarily selects Karna, an outcast, ignoring the rage and wrath of the society. King Vahusha protects his daughter from the attack of male members by saying that "this is a swayamvara and the bride to be has the final say. She has the right to reject any of the suitors for any reason; she has the right to choose whomever she wants" (41). Thus the union between Uruvi the Kshatriya princess and Karna takes place. Karna the strong warrior also became helpless at Uruvi's fragile beauty, 'a beauty infused with a fierce determination' (41).

When Karna reveals his anxiety over their future life by merely calling himself a Sutaputra, it is Uruvi who gives him consolation by addressing him, 'A Sutaputra who was born to show valour and to achieve glory.... Honour is not in a name or status but what you carry in your heart.' (42). Here Uruvi dictates rules for her life.

Kane presents before us another dominant yet passive female character Vrushali, first wife of Karna: incarnation of peace and love. When she comes to know about the marriage of Karna with the Kshatriya princess she accepts it calmly by saying that 'if he is going to be happy, so be it' (45). She calmly accepts the institution of polygamy which is very much popular during that period. Uruvi, though a very young girl, transforms herself into a sturdy matured wife after her marriage with Karna "she was like a haven where he sought refuge and he knew he could never let go of her" (49). By showing two different natures of two different women through two different characters like Uruvi and Vrushali Kane proves the complex nature of woman-the passive and the challenging. Uruvi does not belong to the guild of conventional "life", who lives their life by submitting themselves completely to the will of their husband,

she violates all rules of Karna. She is not Karna's shadow, rather, makes his voice and world. The only guilt she has felt in her life is her intrusion into Vrushali's 'marital paradise' (50) without her consent. Sometimes she becomes a typical wife who works out her envy at her husband's first wife whenever Karna utters good remarks about Vrushali.

As the wife of Karna, Uruvi has to pass through a series of disgraces from many members of the royal family. Kane is successful in portraying Uruvi's experiences as an outcaste. Kane talks about the disdain that a pariah woman faces among the elite with evidences. In this novel all the royal ladies, Uruvi's friends and acquaintances have ignored, avoided, and refused to join with her; more than that, people have treated her with a 'frosty disdain' (58). She becomes conscious of her low esteem and her fall from grace. Unlike other women characters in this novel, Uruvi is never interested in gossips, rather an epitome of beauty and an informed in art, literature and medicine. Among the royal ladies, she is lowered to the rank of an inferior one, an outsider who has lost her identity as the princess of Pukeya and the Queen of Anga. The treatment or the humiliation she experiences from them, reminds her about her mother's words of caution regarding her future life with Karna which was once discarded by her. Author blatantly remarks that:

“At a particular moment she recognized the cruelly superficial world which tried to instill negative spirit in her. But she proved herself that no one can beat her down in the name of social chastisement. King Vahusha's comment on her daughter is enough to acknowledge her bravery/braveness. 'Courage is very odd '.....'Any other person would have locked herself in her home to hide from this deliberately cold treatment and the unkind remarks but not my Uruvi, she's a lioness all right'” (61).

The *Puranas* consider woman as a non-entity and totally subservient to man. As a writer, Kane looks at Uruvi from a woman's point of view. Kane's Uruvi is powerful in questioning the royal patriarchy. At one crucial moment Uruvi questions Bhishma Pitamaha, the most venerable figure in Hastinapur regarding his prejudice towards Karna as the charioteer's son (62) and Arjuna the Pandava prince. Uruvi also questions the discrimination prevalent in the society. How the patriarchal society considers the outcast and how they deny the privileges to the lower caste. It is evident in her statement which she utters to Bhishma: “Karna is a warrior by his deeds but each time whenever he and Arjuna were compared Arjuna has won because of his noble birth and not because of his merits. Is that no unfair that it has blown up into a huge wrong?” (67). Kane's Karna evaluates Uruvi's character and addresses her as an extra ordinary creature of opposites “there seem to be women in her, one rational and other emotional (67). More than a wife, Kane's Uruvi also carries out the role of a guide, mentor, and philosopher---. Karna himself admits it without even a tint of shame (67). “It's not just love and beauty as you so dismissively say. Uruvi has taught me a lot of thingShe has taught me to live” (67). Here the male one acknowledges the female one.

Uruvi lashes out at all male icons. The ideology Dronacharya symbolised was also getting attacked in a female ideology. It is a fact that a teacher should behave impartially by imparting knowledge to each and every one who are seeking it. But Guru Dronacharya has denied it to Ekalavya and Karna due to their caste. Uruvi, though a feminine figure, shows great courage in questioning him by asking “Is that the dharma of a teacher? How can he be the perfect guru if he is so blatantly partial? If he is not humble and honest he can he teach his students those virtues?” (75). She once again proves her gallantry.

She plays different roles in her life. The role of a good daughter, dutiful queen, curer, and a passionate wife. She can be called a reformer who has done her best to change the society's attitude towards the outcaste. Her love towards her husband has no boundaries. Her rage towards people who ill-treats her husband is evident in her each performance. To Karna's query: 'are you going to get angry and abusive with all the people who have behaved badly with me?' (77). Uruvi without further delay says that “yes I shall! I can't bear it if any one hurts you” (77). She also interrogates the position given to women by the royal society. “From when has any woman been informed or asked, for advice on court politics and family

intrigue?" (111). In earlier times women have no voice in society even if it is in protection of her own husband. But Kane's Uruvi sometimes reminds us of Kannaki, the mythical heroine who showed no hesitation in burning out the entire city in terms of her husband.

Starting from her childhood, Uruvi represents a shift in the prevalent system of thought. She expresses the power to question wrong deeds, and also shows the reason to separate the wickedness from good. That is why she retorts Duryodhana for his bad influence on Karna. She does not want to be a passive wife. She strongly expresses her opinions to anyone without considering their age, the time or context. She tries to convince Karna about the false intentions behind Duryodhana's feigned friendship by knowing that it falls on the deaf ears. Her rage against foolish customs is evident in her protest against Madri's act of committing 'sati'. She questions the practice and asks how a mother could do this to her tiny children. All these show what a formidable character is Kane's Uruvi.

Though she feels the humiliation as an outcast's wife, she never shows the keenness to give up Karna for her own sake. A woman's weakness is her sobs. But Uruvi is strong enough to hide her grief. Her cries are always silent and tears are unseen. The world has never paid any attention to the silent cries of an outcast's queen. She is made up of the stuffs like goodness, sacrifice and love. She can be beaten by only one thing-love. The only negative quality which has affected her greatly is her jealousy towards Draupadi. It is evident in the following line: "It is the thought of Draupadi that now tormented Uruvi. She could not forget the look of intense yearning she had seen in Draupadi's eyes, her gaze lingering on Karna" (111).

Kane portrays her as an influential woman as well as a humorous wife. She even does not show any hesitation in teasing her husband when he has expressed his excitement in becoming a father by mentioning that he is not becoming a father for the first time. Only Uruvi can ask such a question to such a challenging hero, her adoring husband Karna. When she comes to know about the tragedy of Panchali she shows the audacity to question the injustice shown towards a woman in public. She becomes furious and becomes a visionary by predicting the impending disaster. She is not ready to subdue her voice; instead, she raises her voice against everyone. She retorts against her husband and openly announces her detest towards him by sharing the news that she has decided to be away from him. She also says that she cannot love Karna as she did earlier only because of his active role in humiliating Draupadi. She is not ready to silently suffer the disgrace on womanhood. Here Kane's Uruvi becomes a real protestor. She asks him "did it make you feel proud, great warrior, to pull a woman by her hair and haul her through the royal hall" (116). She is heroic enough to question the crime committed by her husband. Through her admonishment she makes him confess the wrong cruel deed he has done to Draupadi. As a woman she really values the proud womanhood. Her acts are more than to protect womanhood; they are against injustice of social evils.

Though Kunti is a motherly figure to Uruvi she accuses her of being tricky in using Draupadi as a weapon for the sole purpose of bonding the five brothers forever. She condemns her not only for invaliding woman's soul but also for making Draupadi, a whore before the public by sharing her as the wife of Pandavas. In our ancient society, the royal consorts are not allowed to go out of their palaces. But Uruvi breaks out the shackles and enters in to the role of a healer by practicing the art of curing for soothing the suffering of others without considering the protest from the people around her. She questions her father on the need of cruelty called war. She is well aware of the fact that she cannot put a stop to the so called war. So she sympathises with the war victims irrespective of their caste.

Though she is an ardent critic of Karna, her love towards Karna is never-ending. When Shona alleges that Uruvi's love is fake and she is much self-centered, Uruvi bursts out her feeling and says flatly everything in her mind. She strongly expresses her rage towards Shona when he tries to categorize her elite. She becomes really furious when Shona calls her a pretender who is interested in showing strong discrimination towards her outcast husband. When she comes to know about the fact that Kunti is Karna's mother, she bluntly expresses her anger against Kunti for hiding her motherhood of Karna by giving him up in the river. She says that Kunti has revealed this only in the eleventh hour to save Pandavas and also

calls her a selfish one and censures her as the responsible person for Karna's failure. "He remains rejected even now as he was at birth . You made him a pariah within his own family" (259). Because of her concern towards Karna, Uruvi shows wrath against Kunti while Karna keeps unvoiced. As a dutiful, loving wife she cannot bear the disgrace that has befallen on Karna and counts all the astringent moments in his life and blames Kunti for all these.

Simon De Beauvoir's image of 'the modern woman: who would be equal of men and who would think and act like a man and instead of bemoaning her inferiority to men, she would declare herself their equal' (149), is an apt mould for Kane's Uruvi to fit in. Like modern new woman she bravely counts each and every rule broken by the righteous Pandava and questions the right in discarding the dharma in many vile deceptions. Though the thought of death of her husband torments her very much, she engages in bringing solace to others. As an ordinary woman she is also shattered at the news of her husband, but at that moment she recalls her husband's words and transforms herself into a sole dependent of her family. She shows the courage to console Duryodhana who laments over the death of his dearest friend Karna. Soon after the death of Karna she gains some courage and engages herself with the habit of curing others. She is haunted by the memories of Karna and lives the remaining life as an outcast's queen in Karna's home by rejecting the offers made by the Pandavas.

In *Sita's Sister*, Urmila comes out of the shackle of marginality imposed upon her by the male dominant society. Here, she is not an ordinary girl who remains herself in the shadow of Sita and Lakshman. Instead, it is through her they find solace and courage. She acquires the status of an audacious heroine, who struggles to keep everything intact when the situation is adverse. Like a combatant, she fights against all the malevolence that exists in the society and also questions the injustices and atrocities show towards the submissive category of society, especially to Sita. Urmila's open mindedness is revealed when her sisters reach the palace of Ayodhya. Urmila receives a warm welcome there, but she is quite unhappy about how her sister, Sita, is treated. Urmila cannot tolerate the act of ignorance towards her sister and raises her voice against it. But Sita, who always remains passive and in obedience to the ways of male dominated society, never reacts to the decision or insults made by the elder. Nevertheless Urmila shows no inhibition in questioning the attitude of the family towards her sister. When Kaikeyi refuses to accept Sita as Ram's bride and when they are planning for a remarriage for Ram, Urmila becomes angry and she remarks "This is Tyranny!"(101).

Urmila, at another time, furiously interrogates the policy of the family and also abuses Ram for being silent. When Manthara criticizes Urmila for not helping her in the kitchen as the women in the palace were made to believe by the society that cooking is the duty of the woman. She strongly resists the patriarchal custom and decides to paint rather than cook. She resists the preconception of the society by seeking and gaining knowledge from a very young age and attending intellectual discussions, which were forbidden for women in a traditional patriarchal society. Unlike other women, she does not want to be confined herself within the four walls of her palace. Her curiosity to learn something new has changed the society's notion that girls should not be educated. Instead of being meek, passive and obedient, Urmila becomes cognizant of the feminine energy within her and emerges as a courageous and authoritative woman.

Kane's Urmila exhibits masculine assertiveness throughout while retaining her essential femininity. Her courage and fearlessness have a physical manifestation in an instance where the swayamvar is taking place. During the swayamvar, Ram lifts the Shivdhanush, breaks it and wins the trial. After that incident, when the entire Rajsabha is engulfed in sage Parushuram's wrath, Urmila interferes there wisely to reduce his growing anger and thereby protects the entire kingdom from his wrath. The novel portrays Urmila as a great feminist icon. Unlike other women characters, she makes bold decisions to pursue her passions of painting and studying Vedantic verses. Like Sita, she doesn't accompany her husband to the forest, instead, takes care of her family and engages herself in handling royal duties. After

the death of king Dasharath, the kingdom of Ayodhya is in danger of war. At that crucial moment, it is Urmila who supports others to get ready for the war. She orders like a queen and firmly takes decision to overcome the dilemma. Her ability in handling matters is evident in her mother's words about her, "if you can run your home well, you can conquer the world!" (183).

Kane is successful in portraying the forgotten, unnoticed and unheard characters Uruvi and Urmila before the readers in a very different outlook. Their journey is truly a quest for a voice, an identity and personal progress. The author clearly lends a feminist undertone to the hitherto unheard voices of Urmila and Uruvi and rearticulates their position in the society.

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