

**Seen Through ‘Other’ Eyes: The Reincarnation of Karna in Kavita Kane’s
Novel *Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen***

Affiliation: Tuhin Subhra Mandal, Research Scholar

Dept. of English, North Eastern Hills University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India

Email: tuhinmandal13@rediffmail.com

Abstract: The grand narratives or epics have always been narrated through the perspective of men. Since all the events or incidents that lie before us or readers are unfolded through eyes of men, we hardly hear the voices of women from these narratives. However, with the advent of the postmodern era and feminist waves, the women writers from India have taken up initiatives in unfolding these grand narratives from the perspective of women. Placing their focus on a female protagonist, these women writers have represented the anecdotes through the eyes of female characters. Mahesweta Devi’s story “Draupadi”, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Forest of Enchantress*, Pratibha Ray’s *Yagnaseni: the story of Draupadi*, Kavita Kane’s *Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen*, etc., are some of the important anecdotes that champion the voices of women by going beyond the mythical representation of Indian epics. For instance, Kavita Kane’s novel *Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen* presents Karna’s life from the perspective of an imaginary character called Uruvi, the second wife of Karna in the novel. The aim of this paper is to look at how the character of Karna is revealed through the perspective of Uruvi, how the narration through female-voice fills the gap in History, and how the unfolding of events through the eyes of Uruvi subverts the actual mythical representation of the Mahabharata.

Key words: Subversion, Representation, Grand Narratives, Female Voice, Gynocriticism,

Mythical Essence, Reading against the Grain

Karna is always remembered by us or readers as an ill-fated warrior. Throughout his life, he is a victim of social hierarchy: the hierarchy that gets constructed through prevailing caste system; it is the system of social hierarchy that obstructs Karna to prove his calibre—which even surpasses that of Arjuna, as is unfolded by critics—to the existing society. From the marginalised position, he keeps fighting against social injustice, and his life struggle seems to reverberate the voices of the oppressed and the humanitarian cry for equal rights. The social stigma of being an outcast or ‘dalit’ shatters his dream of a worthy archer, haunts his life forever, and takes away all of his natural rights and privileges from his life.

In their writings, many writers, as well as critics, have talked about Karna’s life, his quality as a worthy warrior, and the social injustice and ill-treatment he suffers from being an outcast or ‘dalit’. In fact, there is no denying that many of these works attack the evil practices and consequences of the prevalent caste system, which denies the equal rights of individuals from the lower sections of the society, through the portrayal of Karna’s life. That many of these novels throw light on the aspects of the social discrimination that he bears throughout his life, from the androcentric point of view, results in the suppression of voices of female in those narratives. Kavita Kane’s novel too addresses the same concern, but from a different point of view. Instead of the androcentric point of view, her novel celebrates the female-voice as a narrator, through which the life of Karna is unravelled. The imaginary character Uruvi—the second wife of Karna, who narrates the events, in the novel that finds no reference in the narratives of the Mahabharata—is purposefully, deliberately brought by the author to reveal and express the suppressed voices of female characters of the Mahabharata that have never been heard of before. Like Kavita Kane, many Indian women writers—such as Mahesweta Devi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and so on—have experimented with Indian epics in their writings. They have adopted the anecdotes from the Mahabharata and

Ramayana, reconstituted the themes from these grand narratives, modified these narratives in accordance with the perspective of a female narrator, and situated their tales into the context of female experiences. The purpose is to celebrate and invoke the voices of marginalised, especially concealed voices of female characters, in these grand narratives and to subvert the notion of androcentric point of view. For instance, in Mahesweta Devi's story "Draupadi" (who is named DopdiMejhen, the protagonist, in the story), Draupadi is presented in such a way that goes against the representation of actual Draupadi of the Mahabharata—who seems to be exact opposite of Devi's Draupadi, who thinks a woman's chastity lies in her body and should not be exposed to the public, and who remains subservient to the norms of androcentric world by soliciting assistance from Lord Krishnaduring the act of her public disgrace; on the other hand, Devi's Draupadi confronts the Senanayaka with her courage, baring her inflicted body. By putting Draupadi in the contemporary context of her story, as if the author intends to reveal the 'other side' or 'alter ego' of actual Draupadi that remains buried in the androcentric narratives of the Mahabharata. In her article "Whose Mahabharata? A Point of View", VrindaNabar remarks thus: "If Draupadi had used logic and emotion to question those who witnessed her humiliation, Dopdiuses her bruised and battered body like a terrible weapon even as, in a curious and subtle shift, DopdiMejhen becomes DraupadiMejhen (182). Similarly, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Forest of Enchantments* projects itself as an alternative version of the Ramayana written by sage Valmiki, through which all the female characters from the Ramayana acquire the chances to vent their feelings, emotions, and ideas. Needless to say, in terms of the projection of Sita's character, Banerjee's Sita does not emulate exactly the character of Draupadi that Devi upholds in her story; rather, much attention is paid on the revelation of the female characters, along with the protagonist Sita, from the Ramayana. In lieu of divine projection of Sita,

Banerjee infuses in her Sita's character the essence of human nature. To quote in the words of critics, "Banerjee confines the portrayal of her Sita within the dictates of the epic and at the same time lets her fancy take flight in endowing Sita with an unmatched intellect, martial art skills, penchant for latest fashion, and ability to express intimate desires sans inhibitions." (Saha 2)

Critics have always speculated over the credibility and truthfulness of history, since history has always championed the voices of men or rulers or victors. When the credibility and truthfulness of history come into question, the voices of narration also become subjected to rigorous scrutiny. An individual narrating history tends to project his/her version of story dominantly, be it intentionally or unintentionally, without taking into consideration of 'other's views or voices', what Edward Said terms as "biased knowledge: for him, the knowledge constructed through an individual always remains biased. Hence, the creation of the alternative version of history emerges as a viable project that incorporates into it the discursive practices of, what Guha calls, "reading against the grain." This method is a way of engaging with a text from the position of marginalised, whose voices have not been represented through main-stream history. By engaging in the form of dialogue, the purpose is to retrieve lost records from history. The retrieval of "small voices" and the creation of mini or micro-narratives are so much necessary as well as important as to pose challenge the existing "meta" or grand narratives, without which the justification to the existing canon of knowledge would not be realised. As a matter of fact, the advent of the postmodern era with its propaganda "incredulity towards meta-narratives", as claimed by Lyotard in his work, further reinforces the idea of fragmentation and opens up the door for the acceptance of these mini or micro-narratives that serve as a 'check' to main-stream knowledge.

There is no doubt, the narration through the perspective of a female protagonist or female characters that has been the central focus of the writings of the most Indian women writers enables the exploration of concealed or private domain of women's life by bringing out the essence of female experiences and by questioning 'male way' of looking at the world. Placing female's voices at the centre and withdrawing its attention from "androtexs", these "gynotexs", as termed by Elaine Showalter, aim at recording female experiences from female's perspective itself in order to establish a literary tradition for women writers, as these texts reject the 'male version of female' on the ground that it does not advocate the actual truth. Borrowing Alice Jardine's concept, in this regard, Showalter expresses that "gynotexs" come under the purview of gynocriticism which claims "theoretical readings of the feminine as a discursive effect that disrupts the master narratives of western culture" (Friedman 14). For gynocritismfuctions, as Nayar defines, as a way of revealing "particular modes of women's writing by positing the women's experiences as being at the centre of both writing and criticism" (97). Thusfeminist theories, incorporating into it the ideals of postmodernism, enforce a project that fights for the justification of the voices of marginalised.

It is beyond doubt that the representation of Karna in the Mahabharata is grand and sombre, wherein Karna emerges as an unrivalled archer and a man of principles. Since every grand narrative or epic celebrates war in its theme, much emphasis is laid on the action; it is through action that most of the characters are depicted and the plot is revealed. And because of a grand war, men receive the leading role in the domain of warfare. On the other hand, unlike the Mahabharata, that the characters from Kane's novel engage themselves in a conversation with each other, in a similar fashion that the plays of Shaw have employed, results in the progression of the plot of the novel through the exchange of ideas. As a result, we find in the novel Uruvi's engagement in a conversation with Karna, Kunti, Vrushali,

Draupadi, and so on. Uruvi not only converses with them but also subtly questions, observes and analyses them, and throws also comments on their lives to the readers. For instance, whenever Uruvi cast her glance at the private life between Karna and Vrushali, she “felt a red-hot jealousy and she hated herself for it. Watching them, she felt her eyes burning in their sockets, like burning coal.” She also captures in her eyes the images of Karna as well Vrushali playing with their sons exuberantly. Thus, through Uruvi, the author intrudes into the private life of Karna and projects him as a dutiful and responsible father and caregiver of a family; and without Uruvi, the venture into the private and family life of Karna would not be possible. Further, in the novel, by castigating the social discrimination that Karna bears as a low born Sutapura, Uruvi, who acts as his constant reminder, redefines the existence of Karna by stating “ ‘[a] Sutaputra who was born show valour and achieve glory,’...[and] [f]or me, that makes you enough of a Kshatriya’ ”, for she believes valour and merit alone can break the barrier of social hierarchy. And as an act of acknowledgement to these words of Uruvi, Karna confesses to the readers that “ ‘Uruvi has taught me a lot of things...‘She has taught me to live...’ ”

The main feature that Kavita Kane’s novel highlights in terms of representation lies in debunking the mythical essence and divinity that serve as an essential phenomenon in any epic. Kunti’s revelation of the legal birth of her three sons to Uruvi twists the tale in such a way as to bring out the historical truth that remains buried underneath the narratives of the epic. And Kunti discloses to Uruvi, “ ‘Ironically , none of the three sons conceived through Sage Vyasa—Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura—were of Kuru blood; they were not sons of king Vichitrivirya at all!’ ” Even, inspite of Uruvi’s pleading, Kunti’s inability to accept Karna as her child in front of public seems to resonate Kunti’s very idea of marriage: a licence for reproduction. Apart from that, Kane’s Karna, under the shadow of Uruvi, posits

himself as a human rather than a divine being. As Karna's moral guide, Uruvi constantly questions him about his commitment to the act Draupadi's public humiliation that leaves dent to his righteous character; as a result, as we see, his repentance becomes visible in the novel. Here, the author is very much keen on installing human values, which are subjected to flaws, in him. Like human beings, by being enraged, he also becomes one of the perpetrators of the incident of Draupadi's Public disgrace, which is reflected in Draupadi's conversation with Uruvi. To justify his act of instigation, Draupadi says to Uruvi these words: " 'But his behaviour was in retaliation for my rejection of him. So, we are even now!...' But I am not angry with him. He insulted me in a moment of heat!' " Instead, Draupadi blames her husband for keeping her as a pawn in the game of dice. Thus, by placing Uruvi as a mediator and as the second wife of Karna, the author is able to give vent to the voices, ideas, agony, and feelings of the main female characters from the Mahabharata, and portrays Karna from the vantage of Uruvi and those other female characters.

To conclude, it can be said that in the novel Uruvi serves as a complement that rejuvenates Karna's life from every aspect. And shifting the concern from politics to family, the author not only represents Karna as a great warrior but also projects him as a human being who is sometimes a father, husband as well as a lover. Though the feminine concern about the domestic sphere has gained its prominence to an extent, yet the novel reflects 'a female version of the Mahabharata' that has never been presented before.

Works Cited

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 3rd ed.,

Viva Books, 2014.

Cheal, David. "Authority and Incredulity: Sociology between Modernism and Post-

Modernism." *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens De Sociologie*,

vol. 15, no. 2, 1990, pp. 129–147. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3340747.

Friedman, Susan Stanford. "'Beyond' Gynocriticism and Gynesis: The Geographics of

Identity and the Future of Feminist Criticism." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*,

vol. 15, no. 1, 1996, pp. 13–40. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/463970.

Kane, Kavita. *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. Rupa Publications India, 2013.

Kitch, Sally L. "Feminist Literary Criticism as Irony." *Rocky Mountain Review of Language*

and Literature, vol. 41, no. 1/2, 1987, pp. 7–19. JSTOR,

www.jstor.org/stable/1347579

Nabar, Vrinda. "Whose 'Mahabharat'? A Point of View." *Indian Literature*, vol. 49, no. 1

(225), 2005, pp. 176–185. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23346588.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to*

Ecocriticism. 14th ed., Pearson P, 2018.

Webber, Sabra J. "Middle East Studies & Subaltern Studies." *Middle East Studies*

Association Bulletin, vol. 31, no. 1, 1997, pp. 11–16. JSTOR,

www.jstor.org/stable/23062216.