

The Unsung Warriors: A Comparative Study of Kavita Kane's Karna's Wife and Sita's Sister

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Abstract—Revisionism can be defined as the retelling of originally and conventionally time-honored myths and dictums. Literary revisionism, as Harold Bloom (1997) conceives of it, is a form of intellectual revisionism which can be perceived in a variety of genres, e.g. religion, poetics, history, political theory. Myths are considered as the legitimate records concurring to which a society should function. So myths have been revised by many Indian authors because they have formulated a certain set of mind according to which women are expected to behave. Women in Indian mythology have been depicted as a meek voiceless object who were only given birth to succumb to the conventional social order. Ramayana and Mahabharata are the great epics written by Valmiki and Vyasa respectively. They have projected women as a voiceless creature who can be bought or sold through the institution of marriage. So the female re-interpretation is required to unravel the phallogocentric nature of myths and challenge their androcentric nature.

The proposed research paper attempts to make a comparative study of Kavita Kane's Karna's Wife and Sita's Sister. The comparative study will project that both the epics are written on the same tangent as far as treatment of woman is taken into consideration. It aims to project that how two different women of two different epics have suffered the same fate. Indian mythology have always been male focused and have glorified Ram, Laxman, Arjuna, Krishna and many more. Women like Sita, Urmila, Vrushali, Mandodari, Gandhari, Kunti existed only on periphery of the grand narrative of the epics. The aim of the paper is to show that both the epics are male-oriented and have marginalized characters like Urmila and Uruvi. It also shows that revision of Kane has revived the epics and the feminine oriented study has bestowed contemporaneity to the epics.

1. INTRODUCTION

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. -Adrienne Rich.

Revisionism can be defined as the retelling of originally and conventionally time-honored myths and dictums. Revisionism per se denotes any effort made to rectify fallacious interpretations of history; it signifies the revising of our conceptions of historical events in the light of new factual

evidence and critical theories and approaches. Literary revisionism, as Harold Bloom (1997) conceives of it, is a form of intellectual revisionism which can be perceived in a variety of fields, e.g. religion, poetics, history, political theory.

2. NEED OF REVISIONISM.

The myths have formulated a certain set of mind according to which women are expected to behave. Myths are considered as the legitimate records concurring to which a society should function. According to Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, the term myth suggests something which is false and illusionary. Myths represents the fabricated demonstration harboring on invalid beliefs which are accepted as “natural” and authentic in the society. Barthes suggests that myths are nothing but perceived reality and they mark the strict line in accordance to which people should behave. Adrienne Rich in her poem *The Strange* criticizes the trivial mindset of mythmakers and says “I am the living mind you fail to describe/In your dead language”.

Women in Indian mythology have been given very low stature. They have been depicted as a meek voiceless object who were only given birth to succumb to the conventional social order. Women were compelled to yield first as an obedient daughter, then as a dutiful wife and in the end as a sacrificing mother. Her sole aim was to take care of family and to give birth to her husband's children. She lived in a world where she was always burdened with expectations and had no permission to harbor any aspirations. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are the great epics written by Valmiki and Vyasa respectively. They have projected women as a voiceless creature who can be bought or sold through the institution of marriage. So the female re-interpretation is required to unravel the phallogocentric nature of myths and challenge their androcentric nature.

2.1 Indian Mythological Revisionism.

‘Mythological Revisionism’ aims to emancipate women from shackles of patriarchy-oriented myths and epics. It also aims at

expansion of contemporaneity of the epics. Indian mythology have been subjected to revisionism by many Indian authors. The authors present their perspective of character by taking protagonist as mouthpiece. Many Indian authors are revitalizing myths by re-telling them. Anusha Parthasarathy in an article of *The Hindu* titled "Myths for Modern Times" states that the definition of myth has been reworked by many writers. She says in the article that for Amish Tripathi, "the very word mythology which is derived from the Greek term 'mythos' means to hide the truth and it is up to us to discover it through the story" (Parthasarathy). He further quotes Tripathi thus:

Probably the only ancient civilization that has kept its myths alive even today is India. This is not because the other myths aren't as rich as ours but because we have understood the philosophy behind them. Myths are not about the stories but about the message you spread through them. And as societies and beliefs change, myths have to change along with them. Modernising and localising myths are ways of keeping them relevant in modern times. Otherwise, they would die out. Whether they would make them relatable is something readers will have to decide. (qtd. in Parthasarathyn.p.)

Generally, women characters have been focused in the re-telling as they are severely marginalized in Indian epics. In 1980s, the era of re-telling myths from personal perspective commenced with an Indian feminist Muppala Ranganayakamma's *Ramayana Vishavrukhsya*. It is Marxist rendition of Valmiki's epic. In 2003, Amit Banker published series of *Ramayana* which is first re-telling in the context of India. The contemporary female writers like Chitra Banarjee Devukarni and Kavita Kane have tried to uplift the stature of women in the Indian epics. They have attempted to relocate the identities of women from subservient *abla-nari* to assertive strong opinionated women.

3. SITA'S SISTER: THE TALE OF AN UNSUNG SACRIFICE.

Sita's Sister, Urmila is one of the most overlooked characters in the *Ramayana*. The epic has always been talked from 'Ram-centric' or 'Sita-centric' perspective. Kavita Kane has chosen, in Robert Frost's terminology, the road not taken. She has depicted the plight of Urmila who was exiled in Ayodhya by her husband Laxman. In Valmiki's epic, Urmila was sternly marginalized as she was subjected to *nidra* ("sleep") of long fourteen years while Laxman was away with Ram and Sita. But, Kane's Urmila was the woman with immense courage and conviction. She was the backbone of dilapidating palace of Ayodhya after the sad demise of Dasrath and Bharat's self-exile. She was the only one who understood that Manthara was the only person who had the wile and the natural endowment of chicanery to persuade Kaikeyi for such venomous evil. Kane has given voice to Urmila which weaves the sad tale of woe and separation from her husband just after marriage. The novel delineates the predicament of Urmila as

she was devoid of the marital bliss and was side-lined by her own husband. The novel is a journey of Urmila which projects her emotional upheaval and unflinching strength.

4. KARNA'S WIFE: THE OUTCAST'S QUEEN: THE VOYAGE OF AN OBSCURE WARRIOR.

Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen (2013), in the words of Ashwin Sanghi is "A terrific blend of mythology and contemporary storytelling" The novel is a re-telling from the perspective of Uruvi, the wife of Karna which runs parallel to enmity between Kauravas and Pandavas and the Great War of Kurushetra. Kavita Kane has expanded the horizon of the epic *Mahabharata* and has given voice to hitherto forgotten character. The novel projects the multi-layered journey of Uruvi who was a Kshatriya princess but rendered helpless after willingly marrying a son of charioteer. She is in quest of identity and marital happiness. Uruvi is dually victimized, first as the wife of socially outcast man and second through personal trials and tribulations. She is doubly marginalized; by the society and by her husband as all his loyalties were devoted to Duryodhan. Kavita Kane has attempted to answer all the questions which have been ignored in the main narrative. The novel is a story of a woman filled with spirit of resistance, unbound love and integrity.

The present paper attempts to make a comparative study of both the novels. The comparative study will project that both the epics are written on the same tangent as far as treatment of woman is taken into consideration. It aims to project that how two different women of two different epics have suffered the same fate. Indian mythology have always been male focused and have glorified Ram, Laxman, Arjuna, Krishna and many more. Women like Sita, Urmila, Vrushali, Mandodari, Gandhari, Kunti existed only on periphery of the grand narrative of the epics. The aim of the paper is to show that both the epics are male-oriented and have marginalized characters like Urmila and Uruvi. It also shows that revision of Kane has revived the epics and the feminine oriented study has bestowed contemporaneity to the epics.

5. KANE'S UNSUNG HEROINES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY.

The re-vision of Indian mythology has assisted in breaking ideal stereotypical structures. Urmila and Uruvi are two such women who have been re-visioned by Kavita Kane for crumbling the old image of meek voiceless woman and for building the image of assertive independent woman.

The nomenclature of both the novels suggest that both the characters were underplayed in the main epic. The names *Sita's Sister* and *Karna's Wife* portray that the protagonists do not have their own identity. They were mere nameless invisible creatures with an obscure existence. Kavita Kane has given voice, identity and individuality to these forgotten characters of the epics. She has brought them to light who

were earlier eclipsed by the towering embodiments of the prime characters. She has created real life-like characters out of shadowy figures.

Uruvi was a character in the epic Mahabharata and was a Kshatriya princess of Pukeya. She was the daughter of King Vahusha and Queen Shubra. “She was beautiful as she was brilliant, she was kind as she was brutally frank, she was loving as she was tempestuous” (Kane 8). She was her father’s world and possessed striking individual traits. She was a spirited child whose vivacity and inherent goodness was recognized even by stern Bhishma Pitamah. “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” (Kane 9).

Urmila, the daughter of King Janak and Queen Sunaina was a Kshatriya princess of Mithila. She has been given inadequate space in the epic Ramayana and is generally referred as Sita’s sister or Laxaman’s wife. Kane describes Urmila as “warm, vibrant and sparkling” (7) with an effortless easy-going manner. Urmila was devoid of her birth rights as her parents have adopted Sita before her who was hurled as the elder princess and was named Mithila, Janaki etc. There was perfect harmony between the two sisters and strong bond blossomed between the two since childhood.

Both the princess had privileged childhood and their sheltered life had been a pursuit of perfection and happiness. The princesses were pampered, loved and adored by everyone. But they both defied the conventional norms and never restrained themselves only to household chores. They both detested the unarticulated decree which demanded that a girl should be hidden away till she gets married. They did not succumb themselves to the orders of society and unfurled their wings to touch the heights. Both were learned eminent scholars and had a keen interest in music, art and literature.

Unlike other girls who groomed themselves to become dainty princess, Uruvi climbed trees with Kauravas and Pandavas and was an excellent horse rider. She excelled in music, art and painting. Her love for nature knew no bounds and soon she mastered the scientific world of Ayurveda. She attended a *gurukul* of Rishi Boglawho claimed that the girl possessed an “unusual gift – that of healing” (Kane 15). Uruvi used her gift in healing the wounded soldiers of the wars. She tended the scarred victims of war in the decrepit tents by the battlefields.

Urmila also possessed an acute intellectual ability. She was very well versed in the Vedas and the Upanishads, politics, music, art and literature. She attended all the conferences and the religious seminars along with her father which no other princess was allowed to visit. While the girls of Urmila’s age weaved the dreams of marriage; “Marriage did not hold much interest for Urmila. It was just a social discipline she would have to conform to” (Kane 9). Urmila grew up to be “acknowledged as a pandit, a learned scholar... had gain mastery over Vedas and Upanishads and could proficiently

debate on religion and philosophy” (Kane 265). After several years of marriage, King Janak invited her to the prestigious conference in which rishis and learned intellectuals were invited from all over the country. King Janak held this conference every year in which all the intellectuals exchanged and discoursed over the various topics. Urmila felt an acute sense of pride as she was finally acknowledged as a learned scholar by her father.

The trail of misfortunes began after marriage about which both the princesses were warned. Uruvi was warned by her parents about the consequences of marrying a man of lower caste. Urmila was warned by a priest that she will not be able to have marital bliss. Both the princesses were cautioned that their marriages will be the reason of their doom. But both the women embraced the love with open arms determined to defeat the monstrous hardships and catastrophes.

In *Karna’s Wife*, King Vahusha was sternly against her marriage with Karna as he was the son of a charioteer. The practice of *pratiloma*, that is marrying a man of lower caste, was prohibited by the *shastras*. He was adamant, first, because Uruvi would have to endure humiliation of the society. Second, Karna was the part of evil triumvirate of Shakuni and Duryodhan. All his generosity, valor, intelligence and fortitude will be in vain because of his blind support to the wicked Duryodhan. In the end, sufferer will only be Uruvi – deserted, helpless and vulnerable.

In *Sita’s Sister*, sage Vishwamitra warned and said “You are a brave child and in your unassuming, charming way, you shall win whatever you aspire for. But it won’t be easy. You are the strongest of four; you shall reap what you receive; not reap what you have sown...” (Kane 60). The sage insinuated Urmila about the tragic events waiting to be unlocked with marriage as the key. Even Laxman himself confesses that he had devoted his life to his brother and he could not accommodate her. He accepted that he would “unhesitatingly” (Kane 68) choose Ram over her and will not be able to give her the love and attention which she deserved. Poor Urmila was already forsaken by her husband because he had different priorities.

Urmila and Uruvi suffered as their fates were intertwined with their husbands’. They had to suffer for the choices their husbands made but they both braved the tears of tragedy and took all the responsibility of their decision.

Uruvi suffered because Karana belonged to the lower strata of social hierarchy. She was avoided in social gatherings and was the talk of the town as she was an ‘outcast’s queen’. “Noblewomen looked at her inquisitively wherever she went, handmaids glanced at her furtively as she passed by, and royal ladies put their head together to discuss behind her back”. “She’s a fool”, “She doesn’t know what she is up against”, “There’s no bigger fool than a woman in love” (Kane 58) were the common remarks heard all around Hastinapur. When her mother hosted a family lunch, many relatives did

not attend it and the ones who did stared her with scornful glances. She was made cruelly conscious of her lower status which bruised her pride. But Uruvi was not a faint-hearted woman. She considered those women abominably dull who were only occupied with mediocre thoughts and did not have any intellectual interests. King Vahushaproudly said "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!" (Kane 61). This statement projects that she was strong-minded woman with imperishable spirit. She did not represent timid and submissive women who would confine themselves to the four walls after the humiliation. She projects a rebel who stood against the hypocrite society and continued to live a dignified life which she deserved.

Uruvi endured agony at second level also. Karan chose to be wicked Duryodhan's loyal friend which led him to his doom. The repercussions of Karan's decision were sustained by Uruvi.

In *Sita's Sister*, Urmila went through her own exile of fourteen years where she was lonely and vulnerable. Her two consorts: Laxman and Sita forsook her without a moment's hesitation to fulfil their duties; Sita as dutiful wife and Laxaman as a devoted brother. The treacherous decision of Laxaman made her feel betrayed, left out and brutally broken. She had to undergo all the pain and hardship for long fourteen years as she was not prioritized by her own husband. Kane beautifully expresses feelings of Urmila and writes:

Came the volcano of grief, like molten lava, exploding and scalding each sense, every thought on how she would be wrenched away from the man she loved for fourteen years. A man who did not love her enough, who could betray and forsake her yet again. He did not need her, heart wept. (142)

Even after being viciously scattered, Urmila's love knew no bounds. She blamed Laxaman for not loving her and hurled mean things at him so that he would hate her and not feel guilty for abandoning her. Though tormented with the grief of separation, she wanted to make it easier for her husband. She said "I love you... but I don't recognize you anymore. I cannot hate you for forsaking me. You have spurned me for someone else and something else" (Kane 146). She spitefully added that she could not have gone with him like Sita as she is a princess born in luxury and cannot afford to bear the hardships of living in forest. This act of Urmila projected her strength and stability of mind in such adverse circumstances. She was a strong-headed woman and had the capacity to handle all the political affairs of the crumbling palace. Like a wounded soldier, she stood strong for the sake of her people and continued fighting relentlessly.

Both the women were connoisseur of art and found respite in art forms. Urmila found solace in painting as she could express her staunching pain through colors. When she was a

princess painting was her ritual and is referred as "morning hours of marathon painting" (Kane 6).

Uruvi found her peace in healing wounded soldiers of the war. Although she was condemned for it because being a queen she was looking after low caste soldiers but she considered it as her *dharama*. (Quote Shona incident) After the death of Karna Uruvi devoted herself to healing.

Both were not submissive or docile but interrogated the authority without any fear. They were women of self-respect and individuality and had the audacity to question the hypocritical ways of society.

In *Sita's Sister*, the decision of Bharat to do his penance as a hermit after the exile of Ram and Laxaman burned the fury of rage within Urmila. She thought that now Mandavi will have to go through the same fate as she and Sita. She outrageously blurted her anger out in the presence of all the elders and reverend sages. She said:

Who cares whatever happens to your wife and your family? Today in this room, we have talked about all sorts of dharma—of the father and the sons, of the king and the princes, of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya, even of the wife for her husband. But there is no dharama of the husband for his wife? No dharma of the son for his mother? Is it always about the father, sons and brothers? (Kane 219)

In *Karna's Wife*, Uruvi is also daring and unhesitatingly speaks her mind. Her deep respect for guru Droncharya did not hinder her from questioning about his blatant biasedness towards Arjuna. She claimed that as Eklavya's talent was pitilessly suppressed because he was a threat to his favorite pupil, similarly, Karna was being crushed. She bluntly poses her question "How can he be the perfect guru if he so blatantly partial" (Kane 75). She represented the woman with strong sense of individuality and epitomizes the power of faithful wife. Her straight forward questions to Bhishma Pitamaha, Kunti and Krishna about Karna's real birth parents projected her a strong supporting wife who would not spare anyone if injustice is being prevailed. She retorted to grandsire Bhishma Pitamaha "How can you call Karna a *sutaputra* when the Pandavas are not the son of King Pandu in the first place? They have no Kuru blood in them at all!" (Kane 248). Her sense of loyalty for Karan was so resilient that she did not even spare Kunti who was her foster mother. Kunti did not reveal that Karna was her first born son; thus the eldest Pandava, because of the fear of society and defamation. She mercilessly blamed selfish Kunti for enticing Karna into his own death which would ultimately save her other five sons. She ruthlessly said "You are a cold-blooded woman. Not a mother. I cannot ever forgive you. Go away, go away with your son's death on your head and my misery on your conscience—if you have any! You are no mother of mine. Nor his!" (Kane 264)

6. CONCLUSION

Kavita Kane's heroines are a blend of mythological-conventional woman and new age assertive woman. They adorn all the roles with perfection—a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law and a mother without irrationally succumbing and losing their selves. Like Shaw's Raina, heroines of Kane assert their individuality in male-dominated era. Kane through her characters has depicted the image of an ideal woman. The comparative study projects the stature of women in both the Indian epics. The epics written by Vyasa and Valmiki have no traces of these great valiant women as they are mercilessly marginalized. Through Urmila and Uruvi, Kane has posed some serious and contemporary questions. The reincarnation of Urmila and Uruvi projects their quest of identity. They are the 'voice of conscience' of today's woman. Just as Urmila and Uruvi were invisible in the main epics and are yearning for recognition by borrowing words from Kane; similarly, today's woman is trying to find her identity and voice in this lop-sided society. Kane has revived the treasured heritage of India and has made it, in Eliot's terminology 'timeless and temporal'.

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