

Examining Caste Consciousness in Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife* and *Fisher Queen's Dynasty*

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ENG-2022-11015314

Volume: 11

Issue: 1

Month: December

Year: 2022

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 18.09.2022

Accepted: 20.11.2022

Published: 01.12.2022

Citation:

Rathod, Jasvant V.
"Examining Caste
Consciousness in Kavita
Kane's *Karna's Wife* and
Fisher Queen's Dynasty."
*Shanlax International
Journal of English*,
vol. 11, no. 1, 2022,
pp. 68–73.

DOI:

[https://doi.org/10.34293/
english.v11i1.5314](https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v11i1.5314)



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Abstract

*Use of mythological tales for creating revisionist literature is contemporary approach of the modern Indian writers. Some famous works of literature, based on mythology are written by writers like Devdutt Pattanaik, Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Volga, Kevin Missal, SarathKomarraju and Krishna Udayashankar. These writers try to reinterpret mythological characters like Shiva, Rama, Draupadi, Amba, Krishna etc. Kavita Kane is one of the popular woman writers of India who renders Indian mythological texts and writes novels. Her fictions are known for portrayals of the mythical characters who are less discussed. She picks up marginalized women characters from the mythical literature of India and retells their stories. She raises issues of identity, individuality, gender, caste, femininity and patriarchy in her fictional works. In her novels, *Karna's Wife* and *Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, Kane has woven issues of gender and caste. Both of them are based on the Mahabharata. She retells the stories of Uruvi, Karna's wife and Satyawati, Shantanu's wife from their perspectives and explore their struggles against discriminations based on gender and caste. The novelist depicts these women characters with their courage, confidence, individuality and power to resist the class or caste-based violence. As modern literary works, their intersectionality is evident and they can be examined keeping in mind multidisciplinary approach. The present article examines caste consciousness as expressed by Kane in her *Karna's Wife* and *Fisher Queen's Dynasty*.*

Keywords: Caste, Class, Discrimination, Gender, Patriarchy, Individuality, Femininity, Mythology, Dynasty

The Ramayana and Mahabharata are the most read and interpreted epics of India. As they have unique individual mythical tales, they are also the most adapted, rendered and retold in many creative artistic creations. One of the most significant features of them is their flexibility of concepts and ideas which have not lost their relevance and therefore used widely with new contexts. Moreover, their intertextuality provides freedom to the scholars of the world to rethink, rewrite and re-analyse some significant concepts. Their wide influence to many artistic creations evinces timelessness. Consequently, they have influenced every field of human knowledge. They are constantly reexamined keeping in mind modern issues and theories, both Indian and Western.

Among the many renditions of these epics, it is notable that many tales of major characters are retold arousing new interest in them. Significantly, modern Indian women writers revise mythical tales to address modern issues including equality, gender and identity. They spill more ink by depicting man-woman relationship and demonstrating how the woman has been objectified from the ancient times. Some of them depict mythical women characters who were depicted in conventional manner keeping in mind patriarchal notions. They re-tell the stories of the women characters who were earlier portrayed submissive and docile. Writers like Kavita Kane portray the less-discussed and

marginalized women characters in their works. One of the significant features of Kane's novels is that she weaves modern issues of gender and caste. In her novels based on Indian myths, she depicts women characters with their courage, confidence, individuality and power to resist the class or caste-based violence. As modern literary works, their intersectionality is evident and they can be examined keeping in mind multidisciplinary approach. The present article examines caste consciousness as expressed by Kane in her *Karna's Wife* and *Fisher Queen's Dynasty*.

By demonstrating rejection of patriarchal norms and andro-centric notions, through her women characters, Kavita Kane colours ancient mythical heroines in modern shades. She depicts how these characters, though they had limited space to express their angst and protest, showed their courage and confidence to challenge both the male-constructed rules and hegemonic structures which conditioned the social set up of that time. She tries to transform the conventional interpretation of the mythical tales which mostly ignored the issues of caste and gender. Uruvi, Karna's wife shows courage to express her love.

She demonstrates her feelings of passionate love for a man who is considered an "Outcast", a person from the lowest strata of Indian society. Moreover, she has a courage to marry with Karna. Her honesty in love and courage to convey it confidently is highlighted in the novel. Karna is observed as a young hero by her. She looks at him with honesty and human feelings without keeping in mind the social hegemonic norms of her days. The novelist narrates:

As a young woman in love, Uruvi saw in Karna all the qualities of a hero who was not being permitted to be one. His flaws made him more interesting. At Hastinapur's tournament when he had outdone Arjuna, he had been openly belittled as a charioteer's son and deprived of his right to dule with the Pandava prince. As the king of Anga, he was the inglorious ruler, looked down upon by royalty and the princes. As a noble warrior, he was cast of for not being a kshtriya. As an eligible suitor, he was disgraced for being of a lowly caste, a sutaputra- as Princess Draupadi had pithily reminded him at her royal

swaymawara. No it was not hard to fall in love with Karna, however unsuitable a suitor he was condemned to be.¹

In *Karna's Wife*, Kavita Kane retells the mythical story of Uruvi, the wife of Karna in the Mahabharata, the remarkable epic of India. The novel is subtitled *The Outcast's Queen* which clearly suggests that the writer has an intention of reexamining the life of Uruvi, one of the less-talked and discussed mythical characters. It also connotes her analysis of the life of a woman who chose and married with a person from lower strata of society. The novelist explores her courage and humanity to marry with a man who is not from the noble class. Karna is thought to be intruder in the politics of Hastinapur. As a member of lower strata of society, he lacks some human rights including a marriage with a woman from higher class. The novelist highlights both the issues of caste and femininity in the novel. As mentioned above, Kane demonstrates how mythical heroines such as Draupadi and others were strongly conditioned regarding the notions of nobility as they could not express their love for a lower-class man just because he was born in a poor family.

Kane's Uruvi is a courageous royal woman who does not have notions of discrimination related to caste and creed. As mentioned in earlier paragraph, the novelist has woven the issue of caste discrimination in the novel by showing the struggle of a woman who marries a man who is known as Outcast. The writer addresses the issues related to the discrimination based on caste and gender. She exposes how these issues were mentioned in the mythical literature of India with a view to provide the hegemonic social structure of Indian society. Through the characters of Uruvi and Karna, Kane reiterates some modern issues of inequality based on social status and gender in India. She denotes further implication by showing how other female characters react when Uruvi informs them about her love for Karna, the Outcast. This usual connection of caste with nobility or its consideration in emotional matters like love or marriage highlight how the mythical women were conditioned by some discriminatory caste and gender-based notions of the hegemonic

¹ Kane, Kavita. *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. New Delhi: Rupa Publication. 2013, p.12.

patriarchal structure. The writer shows how Karna is believed by all as an unwanted intruder in the royal game who has stolen the glory of Arjuna, a member of nobility. She mentions how he was thought to be a son of charioteer and unfit to compete with a Kshatriya prince. Kripacharya questions his identity and Bhima taunts him that his father is a charioteer of King Dhitrashtra and therefore he is fit to “rule the stable, not the kingdom of Anga.”² Further, it is narrated how Karna is not believed to be a man of courage and skills but he is discriminated by most of the people who believe that merit has a definite pedigree.

These issues of caste consciousness and caste-based discrimination are further elaborated in Kane’s novel. She explores the prevalence of caste and gender-based differences and injustices in the mythical Indian society. Moreover, she connects both the issues in the novel and concretizes how the woman who marries with an Outcast like Karna is doubly oppressed. As a modern writer, she highlights how Uruvi, the protagonist of Karna’s Wife resists the hegemonic structure which exploits a woman. Using mythological background of the Mahabharata, Kane has invited her readers to reflect on the condition of a woman who marries an Outcast man. As mentioned in the novel, Uruvi, after her marriage with Karna, finds herself ostracized and in a complicated condition though she was born in a royal family. She is isolated and identified as someone who has committed a crime by marrying a man from the lower strata of society.

Kane exposes how the mythical woman was conditioned to the caste and gender consciousness as well as its consequent discriminatory attitudes and notions. Through it, the writer exposes the hegemonic patriarchal structure and its power to interpellate. The woman, as implied in the text, is conscious of nobility, caste and gender. The androcentric and caste-conscious structure of the mythical world of Hastinapur as narrated by the novelist is very powerful. It can make the woman to accept and follow certain norms and customs created by the higher caste man to control both the people of the lower caste as well the woman.

The issue of caste-consciousness is repeated in Kane’s 2017 novel, *The Fisher Queen’s Dynasty* where she analyses the mythical character of Satyavati of the Mahabharata and presents her fictionally in modern contexts. Satyavati is the protagonist of the novel. Her story is narrated by Bhishm which explores her courage and ambitions. The novelist also exposes how she reacts against the class and gender-based discriminations. The novel is an analysis of some major events of the Mahabharata from Satyavati’s point of view. Kane portrays Satyavati, a pariah girl. The word “Pariah” reflects her status as Outcast. It connotes the prevalence of caste consciousness during that time. Satyavati is portrayed as a victim of a system which can be defined as “a form of differentiation wherein the constituent units of the system justify endogamy on the basis of putative biological differences which are semaphored by the ritualization of multiple social practices.”³ She is derogatorily called Kali due to her dark skin. The writer narrates:

*Kali was used to being treated as a pariah, the lowest of the low, only allowed a small vestige of dignity once she turned into the lane of the fisher folk. She was after all, their chieftain’s daughter. There was certain regalness about the girl as she strode briskly with her head held high, her eyes openly contemptuous.*⁴

Satyavati is brought up by a fisherman. Kane describes how she has to suffer as a woman from the poor class. She lives in the dirty area. She is insulted and suspected of the theft by king’s men. She suffers indignation. Though her character, the writer expresses the angst of the woman of a lower class who is cursed to face the hegemonic oppression based on class, caste and gender. As she imagines: If they can suspect me of theft, then they can arrest me, strip me naked and search me and then lead me through the streets with an escort of soldiers, cast me into a cold, dark cell with mice and woodlice, exactly like the dungeons in which dethroned kings are imprisoned.⁵ This shows how a woman from the

3 Gupta, Dipankar. *Interrogating Caste*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India. 2000. p.141

4 Kane, Kavita. *The Fisher Queen’s Dynasty*. Chennai: Westland Publications Ltd. 2017, p.11.

5 Ibid, p.11.

2 Ibid, p.5.

lower caste is conditioned to accept the injustices done to her due to her poverty and helplessness. The narration of this imaginative thought psychologically shows her frustrated and fearsome state of mind. This also reflects Kane's power to narrate modern incidents imaginatively with a view to contextualize certain key issues. In India, the incidents of stripping the poor woman naked and beating her are common even in the twenty first century. The writer denotes such caste-based discriminatory violent incidents occurring all over India. The novel was published in 2017. It is noticeable that there were more than ten incidents of such atrocities occurred in the same year. Here, the writer acts as a social reformer and she draws the attention of her readers to the misuse of hegemonic patriarchal power by the man.

In the beginning of the novel, she is derogatively called Matsyagandha, the girl with smell of a fish. This name reflects the caste-conscious stigma attached to certain manual labourworks including fishing. She is portrayed as a victim of a social system which can be explained as "a graded hierarchy based on the purity-pollution scale".⁶ Moreover, it also signifies the notion of purity as it attached to Indian caste system. The novelist also portrays Satyavati protesting against the class-based injustices. She reacts: "See, how the rich and the powerful treat us, the downtrodden, without the right to live with dignity, to taste all the horrors of poverty and dependence!"⁷ Weaving the story of Satyavati's birth, the novelist exposes how Adrika, her mother as a poor Outcast woman was used by Uparichar Vasu, the king of Chedi. As a poor woman, Adrikahad to obey the orders of the king who liked her beauty. She was victimized and "King Vasu took fancy of her".⁸ He "seduced, impregnated and abandoned".⁹ For the king, she was a pleasurable "passionate moment"¹⁰. Satyavati is one the children of the forced affair of the king. Dashraj narrates her tragic story:

But she was a fool to hope that a married

king would marry her. he was riding by the River Kalindi one day, when he spotted her. She was a lovely girl and he was totally besotted with her, but only for those few hours of passion. She thought it was love....He immediately left for Chedi, never to return.¹¹

Adrika waited for the king till her last moment of life. She died after giving birth to twin. Her brother narrates that "She begged me to take the children to the king, wanting them to have better life then she had...I obeyed her dying wish. He accepted the son because he was childless at the time; he had five sons later, after he adopted your brother. But he refuses to keep you."¹² The novelist conveys clearly about the condition of the poor woman in the patriarchal hegemony where she can be an object to satisfy man's carnal desires. She exemplifies how the woman from the lower strata of society were exploited by the politically powerful man. With a view to save his honour, Dashraj contrives a fancy story about the birth of Satyavati. He creates following story in order to hide the truth and he knew it well that everyone likes such mythical tales:

King Vasu, while hunting, sorely missed his beautiful queen, Girika, and while dreaming about her, was so aroused that he spilled his seed. He wrapped it in a leaf and gave it to a hawk to carry it to his wife. Instead, the hawk was attracted to another hawk and the semen fell into a river, to be swallowed by a fish named Adrika, who was cursed apsara. After ten months, a fisherman- that's you, dear father caught the fish and killed it, and when you cut it open, you saw two babies, one male and one female, inside the fish. You gave the babies rightfully to the king. The boy child grew up to become famous Matsya king, and the daughter was suitably named Matsyagandha, and was destined to be brought up by the childless fisherman. As for their fish-mother, Adrika, she was freed of the curse and went back to heaven!¹³

Satyavati is portrayed as a courageous woman in the novel. She is depicted as a strong woman who can not only protest against patriarchal injustices but find out remedies. After understanding about

6 Gupta, Dipankar. *Interrogating Caste*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India. 2000. p.34.

7 Kane, Kavita. *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*. Chennai: Westland Publications Ltd. 2017, p.11.

8 Ibid, p.30.

9 Ibid

10 Ibid

11 Ibid

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid, p.29.

her mother's tragedy, she takes a vow: "I will not be a wretched victim like her."¹⁴ To resist against the patriarchal and caste-based norms of society, Satyavati becomes ambitious to grab power. Without deviating from the mythical story, Kane shows how Satyavati feels when she comes to know the injustice done to her. The constant humiliations and avoidance of the society makes her ambitious to gain power. She uses her body to gain power. Though her affair with Rishi Parashar is predetermined in the mythical tales, Kane shows it as her attempt to step up the ladder of economic and social empowerment. She uses sex as a tool to empower herself.

Kane shows her affair with Rishi Parashar as a mutual contract in which the sage gets carnal satisfaction and Satyavati gains power to attract anyone through her transformed body with fragrance. Matsayagandha, a stinking fisher girl is consequently transformed into Yoganagandha, the woman with fragrance. Rishi Parashar informs her that "your musky fragrance will waft for miles together, and shall entice anyone whom you want."¹⁵ She uses her body to "turn her unprivileged life into an unusual one"¹⁶ The novelist depicts: "She had lost her innocence to gain freedom."¹⁷ She demonstrates how Satyavati declares not only to use her body as a site to manifest her power relation in future but to gain upward mobility in the social structure of her time. She claims:

It is better I use my ambitions wisely. I would rather make use of a powerful man and get some benefits, as I have done with Rishi Parashar. If it is looks and lust, which can seduce a man, weaken him, then I shall employ them as my means; I shall use my charms to get what I want. I cannot afford to have morals like the rich and the royal. The righteous would argue that it is unscrupulous, but I would rather be branded that, than be a forgotten casualty, as my mother was. If men can use women, why can't women get something out of men? Beauty and lust is just that- a means to an end.¹⁸

14 Ibid, p.30.

15 Ibid, p.18.

16 Ibid, p.20.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid, p.32.

Kane, in her *Karna's Wife* shows how caste plays important role in lives of Karna and Uruvi. In her *Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, the writer demonstrates how a woman who is humiliated and exploited due to her gender and poverty can resist against the social injustices. Addressing modern issues of gender and caste discriminations, she depicts body as a centre of socio-cultural politics of the ancient time. Through the characters of Satyavati and her mother, she illustrates how poor women were exploited by the rich and powerful men. Satyavati's affair with Parashar reflects her mother's affair with the king of Chedi but Satyavati uses her charm to gain freedom from the social constraints of caste and gender. Retelling the mythical tales of Uruvi and Satyavati, the novelist has successfully revisited past and provided some fascinating insights into some key issues of India. She has successfully blended myths with fiction and this has provided her liberty to portray her female characters explaining their perspectives regarding their socio-cultural transactions.

Using the basis of the Mahabharata, Kavita Kane, in her novels, has debated issues like eligibility, legitimacy and clashes in modern context. This use of mythical tales of characters provides her free space to describe debates about the issues of caste and gender. Since she has fictionalized some mythical characters, she is empowered to draw her conclusions liberally and depict them freely. On the other hand, she has not absolute liberty to deviate from the original mythical tales completely. Here, she has to write in some limited space. Both her novels explore tragedies of the marginalized mythical women. they are not shown totally liberated from the discriminatory and powerful structure of Indian society based on caste and gender.

Kane shows caste-based discrimination has no end. Her marriage with the royal king, Shantanu does not save her to face such conventional approaches towards her. In Hastinapur, she is named as Daseyi Queen which signified her previous social status. She also faces protests from the politically powerful people in the kingdom as she is believed to be the woman who had deprived Bhishma for his right to be the king. The writer mentions in the novel that Dasharaj has compelled Bhishma to take an oath with a purpose to secure the throne of Hastinapur

for the children of Satyavati. She explores her humanity and sympathy towards Bhishma because she knows the pain of losing birth rights. With a view to empower herself as a queen, she rejects the offer of her marriage with Ugrayudh after the death of her husband, the king of Hastinapur. The writer also explores her sharp intelligence and political acuteness as she strengthens the kingdom and claims her devotion and commitment towards the welfare of it.

The titles of both her novels, *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* and *Fisher Queen's Dynasty* explore the novelist's intention to write and debate about the woman who were victimized and ignored through ages by the mythical caste-ridden structure of patriarchal India. They clarify their social status. Uruvi, in *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, is entitled an Outcast. Satyavati, in *Fisher Queen's Dynasty* is an outcast who plays a decisive role in the destruction of Hastinapur. The Mahabharata

is an epic tale of the successors of king Bharata, while Kane presents a fictional story of an Outcast woman who uses her seductive powers to fulfil her ambitions. Though Uruvi and Satyavati were born in royal families, they face constant demarcation and marginalization from the society because they are relatives of the outcast persons. Both of them have courage to defy the conventional social norms.

To conclude, Kane's novels establish her as a reformatory modern writer who throws light on modern issues but it is also important to mention that she cannot free her characters from trauma of the caste-consciousness. They are not free from social conditioning. Uruvi is taunted by other women for her decision to marry Karna. Satyavati forces other women to embrace patriarchal norms. She exploits and controls them. Kane uses mythological tales as basis of her fictions but she is unable to show her fictional characters who can totally revolt against patriarchy or caste system in India.

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