The Conflict Between Tradition and Modernity: A Study of Social Hierarchy in *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*

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Abstract

This research paper examines the conflict between tradition and modernity in Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen by Kavita Kane through a feminist perspective. By reinterpreting the Mahabharata, the novel critically engages with themes of caste, gender roles, and social hierarchies in ancient India. This study explores how Kane's narrative challenges traditional values and highlights the struggles of individuals who defy societal norms. The novel portrays the limitations imposed on women and lower social classes through caste-based discrimination and patriarchal oppression. Using a feminist lens, this research focuses on the protagonist, Uruvi, who navigates the tensions between personal autonomy and societal expectations. Her defiance of traditional norms reflects the larger struggle between convention and progress. The study examines how the novel critiques rigid traditions while advocating for modern perspectives on equality and agency. Furthermore, this analysis considers the broader implications of Kane's retelling, particularly in its challenge to male-dominated narratives. The novel's portrayal of caste relations and gender struggles offers a nuanced understanding of how tradition and modernity intersect to shape individual lives. The findings suggest that Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen contributes to contemporary feminist reinterpretations of mythology, emphasizing the ongoing relevance of these conflicts in society. By revisiting historical and mythological narratives, the study highlights the persistence of traditional hierarchies while advocating for progressive change. Kane's novel serves as a bridge between past and present, encouraging a critical reflection on the impact of literature on social thought.
Keywords: Caste, Feminism, Gender, Modernity, Mythological Retelling, Social Hierarchies, Tradition

The Mahabharata is one of the oldest and most profound epics of India. It offers a rich tapestry of mythology, philosophy and politics which has shaped Indian culture. In recent years many contemporary Indian writers are interested in retelling the ancient epics, such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana in contemporary social contexts. These retellings allow authors to reimagine and reinterpret ancient stories making them relevant to modern audiences. Many recent retellings focus on the experiences and perspectives of female characters, challenging traditional and patriarchal narratives.

Ancient India has a rich cultural heritage with a strong emphasis on traditions, culture and rituals. But now India has been increasingly integrated into the global economy by rapid urbanization leading to the influx of modern ideas, technologies and cultural influences. Modern India has seen significant social changes, including the rise of feminism and awareness of social justice issues. The intersection of tradition and modernity refers to the dynamic process of blending traditional values and customs with modern ideas. One such theme of balancing tradition and modernity in Indian literature is the retelling of Indian stories such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in modern context.

Kavita Kane is one among the Indian authors who write novels based on Indian mythology and historical fiction. In this paper, Kavita Kane's notable fiction Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen has been taken for study. Kavita Kane has made significant contributions to Indian literature by often exploring the themes of women's empowerment, social hierarchy and personal identity. Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen is her debut novel and is one of her best-selling novels. The novel tells the story of the Mahabharata from the perspective of Karna's wife, Uruvi.

Uruvi is the princess of the kingdom of Pukeya, only daughter of King Vahusha and Queen Shubra. The author has portrayed her character as a strong willed and independent woman who takes bold decisions listening to her heart and stands up for herself. This nature is beautifully portrayed by the author as that "I am not just a wife, I am a woman, with a mind and heart of my own" (Kane 287).

Uruvi marries Karna, the illegitimate son of Kunti and Sun God Surya. She is deeply in love with Karna despite her family's objections. Kane portrayed their love as deep and abiding, but also fraught with challenges and difficulties.

In ancient India, society was characterized by a complex social hierarchy which was based on caste system and social class. The caste system was based on the varna system. Social hierarchy of ancient India was complex and played important roles in shaping social relationships. As Kane writes, "The caste system was a labyrinth of rules and regulations, governing every aspect of life" (Kane 45). In Ancient India women faced numerous restrictions, they were marginalized by caste, social class and also by the patriarchal conventions. Through the characters of Karna and Uruvi, Kane portrays the struggle of individuals by the ancient caste system. Kane waves modern themes into her narratives by promoting self-discovery, love, equality and challenges the traditional caste system.

Uruvi, a Kshatriya princess exemplifies modern values by choosing love over royal duty and traditional expectations. "A woman's heart was not bound by caste or creed, only by the love she chose to give" (Kane 210). Her character development from obedient daughter to independent woman highlights Kane's emphasis on female empowerment and individual freedom. Through Uruvi's character, Kane challenges patriarchal norms prevalent in Mahabharata era society, promoting gender equality and self-respect.Karna was born as a Shudra but raised by a Suta, a charioteer, Karna faces constant scrutiny due to his unclear varna status. Yet, he rises above caste barriers through his bravery, skill, and strong sense of self. "Birth did not define a person, character did" (Kane 123). Kane portrays Karna's journey as a powerful symbol of self-made destiny, contrasting sharply with traditional birth-based caste hierarchy.

The modern perspective on love and relationships adds depth to Kane's narrative.The love of Karna and Uruvi serves as a powerful catalyst for modern themes in the novel. Their relationship transcends caste boundaries, and symbolizing love's triumph over traditional social hierarchy. Kane's portrayal of their love as pure and true challenges prevailing notions of acceptable marriages within caste limits. Kane portrays conflict between traditional social hierarchy and emerging modern values in the Mahabharata era. As Kane writes, "The old order was crumbling, and the new was

struggling to be born" (Kane 278). She examines the inner conflict that rages within the characters like Karna and Uruvi. They are torn between the traditional caste system and modern desires. Karna struggles with his unclear varna status and the stigma attached to it. "A person's worth was not in his birth, but in his deeds" (Kane 291). Uruvi faces inner turmoil choosing between royal responsibility and love for Karna. These inner conflicts symbolize the psychological impact of traditional social hierarchy on individuals embracing modern values.

Kane portrays external conflicts which reflects societal resistance to modern changes. The Brahmin class rejects Karna due to his birth status, illustrating traditional caste supremacy. Karna's participation in the tournament, despite being a Shudra, challenges Brahmin supremacy and symbolizes modern equality. Then Uruvi's choice of love over royal duty represents women's empowerment and freedom. Kane skillfully weaves these external clashes into her narrative, highlighting real-world implications of social hierarchy tensions.

Kavita Kane portrays female characters like Uruvi, Kunti, and Madri by analyzing their growth, struggles, and impact on promoting gender equality. The character of Uruvi shows how women can break free from patriarchal norms. "A woman's strength lays not in her silence, but in her voice" (Kane 341). Her transformation from an obedient Kshatriya princess to a strong-willed woman who chooses love over duty, Uruvi embodies female independence and self-respect. Kane highlights Uruvi's inner strength and courage which inspire other female characters and symbolizes modern gender equality.Kunti and Madri, mothers of Pandavas and Karna also play crucial roles in challenging traditional female norms. "Motherhood was not just a duty, but a source of strength" (Kane 367). Kane shows that the selfless love of Kunti, a devoted mother and Madri, a sacrificing wife as hint that defy traditional patriarchal expectations. Kavita Kane portrays the traditional social hierarchy and emerging modern values in Mahabharata era India. Kane explores themes of individual freedom, love, and gender equality, challenging ancient caste system and patriarchal expectations through the characters of Karna and Uruvi. As Kane's work illuminates, "The true battle was not between castes, but between minds" (Kane 401). She encourages readers to reflect on traditional norms and embrace modern values.

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