

# A Vantage View of the Centre: Exploring Marginality in Kavita Kané's *Karna's Wife*

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**Abstract:** *Mahabharata* has always been the story of chivalry, honour and sacrifice as embodied in the kshatriyas like Bhishma Pitamaha, Arjuna, Bhima, Duryodhana and other such warriors. This point of view is challenged when various critical readings explored the world of *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Karna, a marginalized character in *Mahabharata*. But what about the women? How did they view the world of *Mahabharata*? These are the questions which Kavita Kané has tried to answer in her latest book "*Karna's Wife*". The present paper focuses on the ways in which Kané provide "agency" to the marginalized women of the epic by re-visioning the world of the *Mahabharata* from their perspectives. In her text, the marginal has the "vantage view" of the "centre".

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*Mahabharata* has always been the story of chivalry, honour and sacrifice as embodied in the kshatriyas like Bhishma Pitamaha, Arjuna, Bhima, Duryodhana and other such warriors. It is their glorious story chanted for generations. This point of view is challenged when various critical readings explored the importance of Karna who was a marginalized character in *Mahabharata* as he was a pariah, the son of charioteer Adhirath and Radha. His glorious story too becomes then the part of *Mahabharata*. But in the great patriarchal set up women were the most marginalized characters. They have always been seen and judged from the male point of view. Kunti, Gandhari and Draupadi are the three names to be heard and known by most of the readers who are acquainted with the story of *Mahabharata*. They are denied voices to project their own world view. Rather, their presence and deeds are manipulated for the formation of a saga of masculine feats. Therefore they become the characters in a story written by the males. Kavita Kané's *Karna's Wife* is a resistance to such patriarchal narration of masculine feat. The present paper focuses on the ways in which Kané provides "agency" to the marginalized women of the epic by re-visioning the world of the *Mahabharata* from their perspectives. In her text, the marginal has the "vantage view" of the "centre". Here, the great epic seems to trace its origin in the repertory of Uruvi.

Kavita Kané has acknowledged in an interview: "I had initially contemplated making Vrushali-Karna's first wife as the protagonist but realized she was limiting in the scope of the character I had envisaged as Karna's wife. Uruvi was thus created out of dramatic licence. She is fierce, righteous, outspoken yet fallible. And vulnerable" (KaliDoss). Kané has placed the character of Uruvi at the very centre of domestic interior space of the royal families and captures a view of the world of the *Mahabharata* as it is manifested in the eyes of the women, the denizen of those majestic dungeons. Uruvi is a woman who not only questions the norms in the society but also defies them. She refuses to flow with the waves and gives much importance to her own sense of judgment.

Uruvi, princess of Pukeya, is the daughter of King Vahusha and Queen Shubra. She is beautiful, intelligent and is trained in the art of healing. She has her own independent bent of mind and is always pampered by her scholarly father. Kané has painted her minutely and with great care providing her an individual trait. Contrary to most of the young girls who are crazy for Arjuna Uruvi falls in love with Karna. It was a love at first sight. Kané has subverted the notion of "gaze" as it is not the maiden princess unfolding herself before the readers/audience as a male warrior gazes at her but vice versa. Unlike Chopra's visual delineation of the episode of Draupadi's Swayamvara where all the male participants along with Duryodhana and Karna "gazed" fixedly at Draupadi as she approaches in the court, it is a male who appears before the eyes of the readers/audience as a female gazes at him. In the arena of archery tournament she first saw Karna who appeared to her as "serenely divine, swathed in an almost ethereal glow, his black straight, his head high, his strangely golden armour gleaming as radiantly as his handsome face [...] He was tall-taller than Arjuna, the Pandava prince" (Kané 2). The appearance of Karna seems to overshadow all the Pandava and Kaurava warriors.

Uruvi is deeply hurt by the insult Karna has to suffer in the arena because of his parentage. He is a suta-putra, the son of the royal charioteer Adhiratha. He was not allowed to perform the feats and to compete with the Pandavas. When Bhima taunts Karna to "take your father's whip instead and help him out", Uruvi reacted strongly in front of all: "Bhima is downright mean!". She questions, "How can he ridicule the humble and the helpless? [...] why does Bhishma Pitamaha remain quiet when Bhima is so brutally ridiculing the warrior?". The great epical heroes turn out to be the originator of social injustice who remains silent to the

questions of Uruvi. Uruvi's questions stripped off their glory. Duryodhana was the only one who supports Karna reminding the Pandavas of their own ambiguous parentage. But it was a clear strategy to earn Karna's allegiance. Karna was declared by Duryodhana as the King of Anga.

Uruvi decides to marry Karna against the will of all the people including her mother Shubra and Kunti who decided to marry Uruvi off to the Pandava prince Arjuna. In a world where the daughters of Kings were merely the "prizes" to be exhibited in a Swayamwara and to be won by the Kshatriya princes and warriors, she is courageous enough to choose a husband of her own accord in the Swayamwara. She rejects all the princes and warriors and places the garland around Karna's neck. It is a terrible blow to the sense of "honor" of all the warriors specially Arjuna who was confident enough, as he is pampered that way, that he is the most suitable groom any bride will be crazy about.

Uruvi becomes an outcast's queen and therefore like Karna is socially marginalized too. Few relatives attend the family lunch hosted by her mother. She falls from her grace by marrying a Pariah. Sadly enough, for Uruvi is doubly marginalized once she steps in the Pariah palace: "she's kshatriya princess, a stranger, an outsider who will never be able to mingle with us. She is sure to disrupt the peace of this house" (Kané 45), accepted Karna's brother at the news of the marriage. Thus starts her fight for acceptance at home and at society. As far as the relationship between Karna and Uruvi is concerned they were madly in love with each other. Karna is her everything, her God. But Bhishma's warning troubled her often, "One day, you will have to answer this question yourself- is Karna a bad man doing good things or is he a good man doing bad things?" (Kané 62). She desperately wants to take Karna out of the clutches of Duryodhana.

The news of Draupadi's "Chir Haran" brings the dramatic turn in the novel. It was Karna who encouraged Dushasana to drag Draupadi into the court and disrobe her. Lord Krishna is supposed to be behind the divine intervention which saves Draupadi's honour. Uruvi is shocked to hear the news. She cannot expect her God, her Karna to insult a woman like that. She bursts out in tears. This event brings the true image of the Great patriarchs like Dhritarastra, Bhishma Pitamaha, Bidur and others who remained mum to Draupadi's cry for help. The woman's tears had no appeal to the great warriors. Again the kshatriyas are stripped of their glory. Draupadi emerges as heroic figure in the eyes of Uruvi fighting for her honour alone. She has vowed revenge.

Uruvi in her narrative gives others the opportunity to voice their views of the event. Queen Shubra expresses her relief that Uruvi has chosen Karna and not Arjuna, who fails to save the honour of his wife. The maid who informs all these to Uruvi seems equally disgusted. And the person apart from Draupadi who emerges as another heroic figure in Uruvi's tale is Vikarna, one of the brothers of Duryodhana who protests against the injustice. Really, it was not Bhishma Pitamaha, it was not Arjuna, it was not "Daan vir" Karna but a young man almost unknown to the readers of Mahabharata, Vikarna, who emerges as true man and more than that a true human being.

But the climax is yet to come. Uruvi's exploration of the reason behind Draupadi's rejection of Karna at Swayamwara leads her to the most shocking revelation: "Draupadi was in love with Karna" (Kané 107). Uruvi discovers at the Rajasuya yagna how "pensively" Draupadi was "gazing" at Karna. And this realization is confirmed by Draupadi herself when Uruvi visits her after the "Chir Haran": "But I am not angry with him. He insulted me in a moment of heat! Love knows how to forgive. Love is blind-to faults, to flaws. You are fortunate to have him...keep him, don't lose him" (Kané 135). One can ask the question why did not she marry Karna? Uruvi soon provides herself with the answer: "By choosing to marry Arjuna, she had unwittingly offered herself as the wager in the political crossfire between the Kauravas, the Pandavas and the Panchals" (Kané 134). Between the social recognition and personal will Draupadi has chosen social recognition and her own political relevancy. The difference between Uruvi and Draupadi is that Uruvi chooses her personal will and fights for her stand while Draupadi chooses to sacrifice her will and becomes an instrument in the great battle. Uruvi wrote her own destiny whatever it is that gives her a sense of satisfaction. But Draupadi allow others to write her destiny which leads to her dissatisfaction with life. Uruvi realises, had Draupadi married Karna, the battle of Mahabharata would not have occurred. Nothing can give her solace, not even the blood of Dushasana. The war is inevitable.

As far as Karna is concerned Uruvi declares, "[...] Can you just stop loving someone? But I never stopped loving you [...] I love you but with love comes respect and that respect has gone" (Kané 147-48) crushing him completely. Karna is ashamed of his deed and begs pardon but after whatever he has done there is no denial of the fact that "Draupadi will always be there between us. In fact, she was always there but I just didn't realize it" (Kané 119). She promises to return after the child is born to Anga and she does so. But her stand against the event and her judgement over the deeds of Karna reflect her individual traits as well as the conflict between her sense of dignity and her tormented soul which says that "I am over reacting" (Kané 147).

Kavita Kané through Uruvi also provides an outlet to Vrushali and Radha. Radha recollects the days when they found Karna, the way they brought him up, her feelings for Karna etc. Vrushali reveals herself as a strong woman. She lost her first child Sudhama. And she loses her children in the battle too along with her husband. She never reacted to Karna's second marriage but somewhere Uruvi felt that after her entry in the Pariah palace she has become alone. Both radha and Vrushali love unconditionally Karna and so do Adhirath

and Shona. Uruvi has explored Kunti's psychology too. She always tries to get an access to her heart where she clearly hides her true feelings. And the revelation of Karna being her own son leads to the anger of Uruvi highlighting the clash between social recognition and personal will. The disgust is heightened when Kunti forces a condition on her helpless son that Karna would not use any divine weapon more than once.

The war brings with it the death and destruction. Uruvi offered her art of healing to the wounded soldiers. But her personal wound can never be healed. The loss of "Kavach and Kundal" is the indication of the event which would take place soon. Karna must die. But she never suspends her sense of judgement and never loses her sanity. She is stern in face of reality. She castigates Karna for accompanying the Kauravas in the murder of Abhimanyu who was a little older than their own son Vrishakethu. She along with her family weeps the death of the sons of Karna and Vrushali. Uruvi criticized the way the Pandavas use Shikhandi as Arjuna's armour. And finally came the day of battle between Karna and Arjuna. The last meeting of Uruvi and Karna attains a tragic grandeur and gives the readers a view of a common ordinary couple on the verge of separation by death. Ashwatthama's description of Karna's death that the latter was attacked from behind by Arjuna strips him (Arjuna) of his splendor and grandeur. Uruvi was totally shattered but she struggles not to cry anymore. Vrushali committed suicide.

After the death of Radha and Adhiratha, Uruvi spends the rest of her life in Pukeya looking after her parents and treating the sick and the wounded. She rejected the offer given by the Pandavas that Vrishakethu should reign Hasthinapur as king as he is the son of the eldest Pandava, Karna considering it a seed for another Mahabharata and urges them to make Parikshit, son of Abhimanyu the rightful king.

So, *Karna's Wife* tells us a story preserved long ago in the repertory of Uruvi- a story which includes her life and the lives of all the men and women whose voices and even identities were deliberately denied so far. Uruvi's story is not the story of chivalry but a saga of lost dream, a saga of endless suffering.

#### REFERENCES

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