

# Karna the Unsung Hero of Mahabharata: Through Kavita Kane's Novel *Karna's Wife: The Outcaste's Queen*

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**Abstract:** This paper is a study about *The Unsung Hero of Mahabharata, Karna*, through the novel *Karna's Wife: The Outcaste's Queen*, written by Kavita Kane. Mahabharata is known to be the greatest epic among the holy books. Kane brings a unique perspective to the story of Karna through the eyes of his wife Uruvi. Last few years witnessed the outburst of Indian mythical writers who, through their creative writing brought characters into the limelight who were unheard and ignored from the main stream. Kavita Kane a prolific writer, who has authored the book which narrates the poignant tale of the venerable legend, Karna, from the perspective of lesser-known character Uruvi. As the novel is narrated from Uruvi's point of view, it can be considered as the story of Uruvi herself. Thus, the novel is about the legendary hero, who fights against the society that prefers caste over merits, his struggle for acceptance and respect that he deserves as a true warrior and the dilemma of Karna on knowing his real parentage. Thus, Kane's debut novel introduces Karna in a more refreshing way through the eyes of Uruvi.

**Keywords:** Retelling, Outcaste, Marginalization, Identity Crisis, Tragic Hero, Ethical dilemma

## 1. Introduction

Indian epic like Mahabharata has a wealth of materials for contemporary writers to explore and reconstruct. Many writers have retold the Indian epics in their own creativity and set up a new version of it. Many of these writers incorporated the era's sentiments into their works. They tried to highlight the prevalent social, cultural and political issues of the society. Kane is such a writer, who has narrated the story of Mahabharata in a new perspective by taking character like Karna who has been marginalized.

The text chosen for the study is *Karna's wife: The Outcaste's Queen*, written by Kavita Kane. There has been a huge amount of retelling about Mahabharata, but Kane's debut fictional novel *Karna's wife: The Outcaste's Queen* is a story about lesser-known character, Karna, cleverly told from Uruvi's point of view. Kane through her exceptional way of writing was able to take the readers to the deep psyche of the protagonist of the novel.

The whole novel narrates the suffering and hardships of Karna's life from his birth to death. Karna by birth, born as son of Kunti and Surya, the sun god, earned the opulence of royalty, but in life he was abandoned. In every phase of Karna's life he faced rejection; first by birth he was rejected by his mother, then by his guru Drona Acharya, even later, he was rejected by the whole society too. It is this suffering of Karna narrated by Kane through his second wife Uruvi. The novel begins with the archery competition that was fought between Kauravas and Pandavas. In the battle Arjuna, the third Pandava, named as the world's best archer was challenged by Karna. Karna who is skilled at forging arrows and bows, is the only one who can defeat Arjuna. But on realising that Arjuna was about to lose the battle to

Karna, he was questioned about his birth and identity. Karna without any further thought disclosed his identity, that he is son of a charioteer. A society which gave prime importance to class and caste of an individual addressed him as sutaputhra. Karna who has been armoured with blessings and earrings of God Surya was abandoned by his mother princess Kunti by birth. Karna throughout faced rejection and abandonment, and has been labelled as an outcaste. Karna did not receive true respect and honour that he deserved. At the very moment Duryodhana, the Kaurava prince, came forward and rescued Karna from the humiliation and proclaimed him as the King of Anga. This became a major turning point in Karna's life. There bloomed a new friendship between Duryodhana and Karna, and he was always indebted towards him for giving him a new identity. There is Uruvi, princess of Pukya, who fell in love with Karna. The entire novel is written in the background of Mahabharata and is a tribute to tragic character Karna. As Kane in an interview says "Karna is the most enigmatic character in Indian mythology. He is seen either as Arjuna's rival or Duryodhana's friend, the tragic hero who is doomed and damned." Novel explores through Uruvi, who boldly took the decision of marrying Karna even after knowing that he belongs to a lower-class community, son of Suta. It is Uruvi who witnessed the fate of Karna. She defines Karna as "man seemed to be born in adversities" and his life "was a fairy tale gone wrong" [KW 12].

Majority of people who are familiar with Mahabharata has had an anti-hero image on Karna. As in novel King Vahusha, father of Uruvi, engages in a conversation with her after her stubborn decision of marrying Karna and addressed him as a bad man. He says; "There are four examples of bad man these days, the dushtachathushtayam. One is Shakuni, Duryodhana's maternal uncle. The second is Duryodhana

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himself. The third is the malicious Dushasana. And the fourth is, sadly, Karna.” [KW 19]. But he is a noble person but a hero with flaws. He is a generous person with a sense of integrity, and a man of righteousness. He led a tragic life with humiliation and sacrifice. In many instances he was publicly dishonoured and scorned by the people around him. One such an instance, where Swayam Vara Day of Draupadi was conducted, Karna was rejected by her because he did not belong to the royal blood. And Karna is known as the low born king because he was brought up by Radha and Adhiratha. As in the novel Uruvi says “Karna, the King of Anga, the king with a crown of thrones, the king who was a sutaputra” [KW 13]. Even though he is king of Anga, or known to be as Anga raja, people still view him as son of a charioteer.

By choosing Karna as the protagonist of the novel, Kane ultimately tries to convey Karna's deep suffering and dilemma sprouted from his identity crises. He was a son who was abandoned by his mother Kunti by birth. Later he was raised by Adhiratha and his wife Radha, then he came to be known as son of a charioteer, a Suta. By this Karna's identity become a Shudra instead of a Kshatriya. This was the first flaw happened to his identity. Later he was humiliated by Guru Drona when he approaches him for learning warfare. Karna was rejected by Guru Drona Acharya for not being a person of royal blood. This prompted him to attain his goal of becoming a warrior in any means. That lead him to lord Parashurama but Karna manipulated him as a Brahmin so he can learn everything from him. But Parashurama on knowing his true identity that he is a Kshatriya, he curses Karna. In both cases he was rejected only in the name of caste or class that he belonged to. This turned into an ultimate dilemma that an innocent individual like him faced throughout his life. Another tragic incident that Karna has faced in the name of his identity is on the Swayam Vara Day of Draupadi. Even though he attains his target of hanged fish, he was rejected by Draupadi for not being a Kshatriya. All these instances show the prevailing system of class hierarchy in ancient India. Karna has been subjugated and was marginalised for a thousand times in the name of caste and class by the royal family, including Pandavas. He was in search of his true self. All these compelled Karna to face a state of emotional distraught.

Karna is always seen by the society as a person of inferior rank, but in reality, he is from royal family. When world hails Arjun as the greatest warrior, Karna with better potential and skills compared to Arjuna was rejected because of the reason that he is of low origin, a Suta Putra. Thus, his voice is always unheard. When Karna spent most of his lifetime battling with fate, it was Duryodhana who became a trustworthy companion and offered his shoulder to lean on. It is Duryodhana, the eldest of Kaurava who elevated Karna's position to the title of Anga raja. For Duryodhana, Karna's low born origin or the label of Suta never mattered, he only gave value to the strength and potential of Karna. It is because of this Karna always become a loyal friend of Duryodhana. Later onwards Karna become the decision maker of Duryodhana in every situation. But their lasting friendship created uneasiness in the mind of a few people primarily Uruvi. Uruvi was always fearful about their close

friendship. She was disappointed that this friendship might led Karna to his death bed. When Uruvi expressed her fears about their friendship and dislike towards Duryodhana, Karna lashes out with anger. And Karna says;

“Because whatever his nature may be, he is loyal. And he is my friend. It was Duryodhana who helped me when I was publicly disparaged at the archery contest, it was he who first acknowledged me as a worthy warrior, it was Duryodhana who made me Kshatriya, by merit if not by birth. When I was ridiculed by Draupadi at her Swayam Vara, it was Duryodhana who stood by me, it was Duryodhana who challenged king Drupad and Dhrishtadyumna and questioned their intentions at the same Swayam Vara. It is Duryodhana who sides with me whenever Drona Acharya and Bhishma Pitamaha are dismissive about me, it is Duryodhana who has given me respect that I am worthy of. No one else has done that. Rejected by all, I have found honour among the Kauravas. For all this and more, I shall be eternally grateful to Duryodhana. [KW 85]”

Uruvi on hearing all this put many counter arguments against their friendship, Karna defended her and stayed stubborn in his decision. This led Uruvi into a more disappointing state of mind. Out of long arguments with Karna, Uruvi came to the realization that no words can dissuade him from his friendship with Duryodhana. Karna says to Uruvi that;

“I will always stand by him, whoever and whatever I am against. Duryodhana gave me kingdom without asking me for it and I shall give him my undying friendship in return. I promised him I shall serve him till my last breath and I am committed to him for life. [KW 86]”

All these words of Karna are filled with the integrity and authenticity towards his friend Duryodhana. For Karna Duryodhana is a saviour beyond a friend who stood beside him during his worst period. Karna always had a quest for respect and honour, because wherever he goes, he was rejected and was humiliated in the name of his caste and was not able to achieve his desired goal. It is Duryodhana who has given him that respect, and valued his skills.

As Karna kept turning new pages of his life, fate found new ways to toy with him, where he had no options but to watch as his life crumbled into pieces. His life is full of misfortunes. From the very birth of Karna was misfortune, as he was abandoned by his mother. This followed his life throughout like a shadow. Karna is a person of morality and ethics. But some of the faults in his character is because of decision and other is his fate. His life went through many sacrifices and miserable situations. This makes Karna a tragic hero. Of course, Karna is a good human being, but at some point, on knowing that Duryodhana wrong doing he has become a passive participant. But whatever Karna or Duryodhana did wrong, they had their own justification. The root of their wrong doings is their anger and hatred towards Pandavas. Karna was criticised for what he has done in Kauravas Sabha, that he publicly called Draupadi a prostitute. Even Karna himself did not have any justification to what he has done to Draupadi. Kane has detailed the

incident happened in the Kaurava Sabha in the novel, and the conversation between Uruvi and Karna as well. Uruvi was completely shattered on knowing Karna's involvement in that shameful event. She openly accused him for his shameful act towards a woman. But he was regretting deeply for what he has done towards Draupadi. He says to Uruvi;

"I will not defend myself, for what I have done is disgraceful. Yes, I have been brute and a beast and done the lowliest thing possible. I hate myself for what I did" [KW 117]

Karna also explain his real hatred towards Draupadi at time of disrobing. He says;

"And I recalled Draupadi as she was at her Swayam Varahateful, haughty, and taunting. I remembered how her words hurts me and I think I went completely crazy after it" [KW 117].

After all these incidents he had a guilty feeling for what he has done towards Draupadi, out of hatred. He even accuses himself for his shameful act. He asks Uruvi for forgiveness. At last, Karna says to Uruvi that; "Draupadi deserves revenge; and I deserve the death she has cursed me with" [KW 119].

It is Karna's fate that made his life more miserable. Fate's claws gripped Karna tighter at the battlefield. First, he has been betrayed by lord Indra. Indra approach Karna disguised as a Brahmin and asked for his protective shield, the kavacha kundalas. Karna was aware of Indra's tricky game offer what he has asked. Being a benevolent and a humanitarian, nothing was there for Karna to think. Later he was in the middle of an ethical dilemma after Krishna revealed information about his real parentage. When Krishna revealed that he is the son of Kunti, Karna suddenly broken down. That was a crucial time for Karna, that he was forced to take a decision to whom he fight for. He was in dilemma that whether it is with his friend Duryodhana or with his brothers Pandavas did he fight. He was in a state of conflict between dharma and duty. This led Karna into a state of mental trauma. For Karna this is the most crucial situation, a traumatic situation that he had ever come across in his life. Krishna tries to persuade Karna by putting forward many offerings including Draupadi. At last, Karna came to a final decision, that he will stay with Duryodhana and always support him. He gave reason to Krishna like this;

"Yes, by dharma I may be a Pandava. But I am Radheya first. I was bought up by my mother Radha and Adhiratha with selfless love and unquestioning affection. Neither the whole world nor the biggest kingdom can make me either leave them or tempt me away from the bonds of their love. I cannot betray them nor I cannot betray Duryodhana. He is only friend I have and I am indebted to him eternally. I would rather die than be ungrateful." [KW 237 - 238]

Karna later ask Krishna not to disclose this to Pandavas, as he is the eldest Pandava. Also, he asks Uruvi, to conceal his true identity of eldest Pandava with her. Thus, for Karna this is situation of both happiness and sadness, that he is happy because he come to know his true self, and sadness is that he

going to fight against his own brothers. Later Kunti came to Karna and try to influence him but realises her selfishness and love towards her five sons. At last, she asks him for a favour, that is to spare her five sons in the battle and not to use Brahmastra more than once. Karna approved her favour with an exception that he will not spare Arjuna. This was very a disgraceful and selfish act of Kunti. This was yet another dilemma that he faced during the period of battle. At last, on the eighteenth day of war, Karna the greatest warrior of Mahabharata faced his death by Arjuna, with his vajra arrow, weapon of Indra.

Karna the most enigmatic and venerable legend of Mahabharata, who led a tragic life. Kane through her novel, *Karna's wife: The Outcaste's Queen*, elaborately explains Karna's life and she present Karna as a person who break all the boundaries of caste system and continue to move forward. She brings clarity in explaining each incident in the life of Karna, with her incredible language construction. He is a person who is trying hard as an individual. Kane through Uruvi, make us read the unread chapters in the life of Karna. Karna always upholds his Dharma in all the situations. Then Karna's friendship with Duryodhana, his undying love towards Duryodhana. Here we are able to see Duryodhana from the angel of faithful friend, instead of a villain. This has evoked sort of compassion and respect towards him, for the genuine nature that he invested in his friendship with Karna.

The story of Karna is filled with empathy. His story evokes sympathy and empathy in the mind of the readers. His story is full of twist and turns from birth to death. By birth he was abandoned by his mother, and lived as a person of low-class community. Karna was disgraced in many situations in the name of his caste, and always called as sutaputhra. He is struggled for receiving honour and respect even for an identity. At every stage of his life, he endures the hardship, and moves away from the path of righteousness. He is a real hero, he will be always be a faithful friend of Duryodhana, till his last breath. All this made him a legendry character. On conclusion we can say that, Karna is the unsung hero of Mahabharata.

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