



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Feminist Narratology and Gendered Reimagining of the Mahabharata in Kane's work *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*

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## Abstract

This research undertakes a critical exploration of *narrative voice* and *silence* in Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, with particular emphasis on the fictional character of Uruvi- a creation absent from the canonical Mahabharata yet instrumental in Kane's retelling. By situating Uruvi at the narrative's center, the study examines how her voice, emotions, and agency are meticulously woven to destabilize entrenched patriarchal hierarchies and to reframe the epic through the lens of feminist narratology. The analysis focuses on narrative strategies such as focalization, interiority, and character construction to reveal how Kane reimagines the Mahabharata not merely as a tale of war and dharma but as a stage where silenced female subjectivities find articulation.

The fictional insertion of Uruvi emerges as a deliberate act of counter-narration, one that unsettles the monolithic, male-oriented structure of the epic and compels a reconsideration of myth as a living, adaptable form of cultural memory. In foregrounding the silences and unspoken resistances within epic tradition, this study highlights how mythological fiction becomes a site for negotiating gendered histories and reclaiming marginalised voices. Ultimately, the research contributes to broader literary debates on gender, voice, and reinterpretation by demonstrating how feminist re-visioning transforms silence into speech, absence into presence, and myth into a canvas for contemporary cultural critique.

**Keywords:** Narratology, Gender, Feminism, Mythology, Silence.

## Introduction

Over the past few decades, Indian English fiction has witnessed a renewed interest in reinterpreting mythological narratives, particularly the great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, through feminist and contemporary

lenses. These works are not mere reconstructions of familiar stories; rather, they constitute deliberate acts of resistance against the patriarchal foundations embedded within the canonical texts. By foregrounding silenced voices and re-centering marginalised perspectives, such retellings intervene in both literary tradition and cultural memory (Tharu & Lalita, 1991).

Among the prominent contributors to this literary movement, Kavita Kane has carved out a distinctive niche by focusing on forgotten or underappreciated women in Hindu mythology. Her debut novel, *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013), exemplifies this project by introducing Uruvi, a fictional wife of Karna who does not appear in Vyasa's *Mahabharata*. Rather than retelling Karna's narrative through conventional heroic or tragic frames, Kane positions Uruvi as the central focalizer, thereby transforming the epic's narrative authority. Through Uruvi's eyes, the mythic world is infused with emotional intensity, ethical ambiguity, and psychological complexity—dimensions often absent from the epic's lofty, fate-driven depictions of male heroism.

Kavita Kane introduces Uruvi as the primary lens through which the mythic world is both perceived and

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judged. Uruvi's presence injects a kind of subjectivity long denied in epic tradition: she embodies emotional depth, ethical complexity, and psychological nuance in a narrative otherwise dominated by masculine valor and fate-driven inevitability. Through her, Kane unsettles the structural priorities of the *Mahabharata*, which traditionally glorifies martial courage and heroic sacrifice, by instead foregrounding female agency, affect, and critique. In doing so, Kane signals that mythological fiction is not merely about the resurrection of ancient tales but also about interrogating the silences within them.

Kane achieves this transformation by deploying narratological strategies such as internal and external focalization, interior monologue, and affective introspection. Kane uses this intervention primarily through narrative strategies such as focalization and character construction, which are central to feminist narratology. As Gérard Genette (1980) defines, internal focalization filters the story through the consciousness of a character, while external focalization maintains distance, narrating events as observable action rather than inner thought. Mieke Bal (1997) further critiques and expands upon Genette's distinctions, noting that the act of focalization determines not only "who sees" but also "who speaks" and thus governs the very politics of narrative authority. In *Karna's Wife*, Uruvi emerges as both focalizer and focalized subject, alternating between moments of psychological depth and scenes of observable presence, thereby reconstituting the *Mahabharata* through a female lens. By privileging Uruvi's internal monologues, her hesitations, and her intimate reflections, Kane crafts a voice that diverges sharply from the epic's characteristic remoteness and lofty diction. Uruvi's narrative centrality enables the novel to function simultaneously as a literary retelling and a critical intervention in myth-making. It resists the monumental grandeur of the epic and replaces it with the immediacy of lived female experience, thereby unsettling a genre that has historically excluded such perspectives.

While much critical attention has been paid to reinterpretations of canonical women in mythology—such as Draupadi in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* or Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments*—Kane's conscious construction of a fictional female figure is a strikingly different strategy. Uruvi is not recovered from the margins of epic memory; she is invented precisely to occupy the absence of female voices in the epic's male-centered narrative fabric. This act of fictional invention marks a distinctive feminist intervention because it destabilises the notion of epic authority itself, suggesting that the silences of myth are not accidental but ideological. Thus, the study of Uruvi opens a new direction in mythological fiction—one that highlights how narrative agency, silence, and voice can be reconfigured to resist the authority of ancient texts and their patriarchal structures.

### Research Aim

The study aims to examine how Kavita Kane, through the fictional character of Uruvi in *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, transforms silence into speech by constructing a gendered counter-narrative to the traditionally patriarchal framework of the *Mahabharata*. It seeks to explore how feminist narratology redefines epic retellings by foregrounding female voice, agency, and subjectivity within mythological fiction.

### Research Objectives

- To investigate the narrative strategies employed by Kavita Kane—such as focalization, characterization, and interiority—in shaping Uruvi's voice and presence within the epic framework.
- To analyse how the fictional insertion of Uruvi challenges patriarchal structures and re-centers silenced female perspectives in the *Mahabharata*.
- To evaluate the role of silence and voice in feminist narratology, particularly in reinterpreting canonical epics through contemporary mythological fiction.
- To situate Kane's re-visioning of the *Mahabharata* within broader debates on gender, voice, and literary reinterpretation, highlighting how retellings become acts of cultural resistance.

### Focalization: Internal and External Dimensions

Gerard Genette (1980) defines focalization as the regulation of narrative perspective—*who sees* and *who speaks*. Mieke Bal (1997), expanding on Genette, cautions that focalization is not merely technical but ideological: it determines whose vision and consciousness shape the narrative. In *Karna's Wife*, Uruvi becomes both focalizer and focalized, embodying internal focalization in moments of introspection while also being subject to external focalization in scenes where her presence is observed from without.

For instance, Uruvi boldly asserts her desire to marry Karna despite familial disapproval: "*I am not ashamed to have fallen in love with Karna. And if it's going to be a mistake, I think I have enough courage in me to tackle the worst moments as and when I come across them one day*" (Kane, 2013, p. 21). Such passages exemplify internal focalization, granting narrative centrality to Uruvi's emotional truth. The narrative fully immerses the reader in her inner conviction and emotional courage. This is a clear case of internal focalization, where the story is filtered through her consciousness. Her boldness, unusual for a woman in epic tradition, reflects both her upbringing and her independent judgment. Through this direct representation, Kane resists the epic's tendency to render women voiceless or defined only in relation to men.

Likewise, her reflections on Karna's loneliness, "*In spite of having us... he is always so alone, ever unfulfilled, constantly haunted by the unresolved ambiguity of his true self*" (Kane, 2013, p. 173)—transform silence into interpretive

voice, making Uruvi both witness and commentator. At the same time, external focalization surfaces in episodes such as the *swayamvara*, where Karna's discomfort is narrated without access to his inner thoughts: "*This swayamwara was a travesty, he thought wryly, the outcome of which was known to all*" (Kane, 2013, p. 45). These narrative shifts highlight how Kane employs focalization to complicate epic authority and redistribute narrative voice. By positioning her as a focalizer of Karna's psychological state. Here, she not only interprets Karna's inner torment but also offers the reader an intimate access to his vulnerabilities. Importantly, her mediation transforms Karna's silence into readable meaning. Through her interpretive voice, silence itself becomes a narrative strategy: what Karna does not express, Uruvi articulates, thereby converting absence into presence.

On the other hand, moments of external focalization are equally significant. In the *swayamvara* scene, the narrator conveys Karna's discomfort not through his inner voice but through detached description: "*This swayamvara was a travesty, he thought wryly, the outcome of which was known to all*" (Kane, 2013, p. 45). Here, the narrative distances itself from Karna's emotional register, instead offering the reader an observational stance. Likewise, when Uruvi contemplates the humiliation of garlanding Karna instead of Arjuna—"*She faltered as she took her first steps, feeling a moment's panic, her heart thudding hard*" (Kane, 2013, p. 47)—her panic is mediated not solely through her inner voice but also through a narrator who describes observable hesitation and physical response. These instances of external focalization remind us that even in a novel that privileges female consciousness, the narrative occasionally retreats to epic-like detachment, thus balancing subjectivity with a broader narrative scope.

Another telling example occurs in the description of Vrushali welcoming Uruvi: "*Vrushali greeted Uruvi, the newlywed, to her new home... none [disdain] came and [she] felt her own defences melting away... Vrushali, on the other hand, makes Uruvi feel uneasy, and she 'at last [looks] up to glance right into her rival's liquid eyes'*" (Kane, 2013, p. 46). The narrative does not enter Vrushali's inner world but restricts itself to Uruvi's observations of her rival's expressions and gestures. The meaning is left for the reader to deduce. This technique reflects Genette's definition of external focalization, where narrative authority lies not in interiority but in external cues—action, dialogue, and surface behaviour.

By alternating between internal and external focalization, Kane complicates the narrative texture of *Karna's Wife*. Uruvi is not merely the passive object of narration; she is both the lens and the subject, the one who interprets silence and the one who is observed in silence. This dual positioning allows the novel to transcend the limits of a simple retelling, transforming it instead into a feminist critique of myth-making itself.

Significantly, while scholars have examined feminist reimaginings of canonical female figures such as Draupadi

(*The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni, 2008) and Sita (*The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni, 2019), the conscious invention of a fictional female character like Uruvi remains critically understudied. Uruvi's literary presence constitutes not just a narrative innovation but also a political intervention—her very existence exposes the silences of the epic and rewrites its cultural legacy. As Uma Chakravarti (1993) argues in her discussion of women in myth, patriarchal traditions often sustain themselves through the exclusion of female subjectivities; Kane's fiction reclaims this absence by giving voice where none previously existed.

Thus, this has explored how *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* reconfigures silence and voice, interrogates patriarchal authority, and contributes to feminist narratology within Indian English literature. Analysing Uruvi as both focalizer and focalized, the research foregrounds how silence itself becomes a site of meaning, and how mythological retellings evolve into acts of cultural resistance and gendered re-imagination.

The reimagining of epic narratives has long occupied a significant place in the literary landscape, particularly in cultures where myths, legends, and epics form the bedrock of collective consciousness. Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* epitomizes this trend, not simply by revisiting the Mahabharata, but by radically transforming the epistemological lens through which the epic is retold. Rather than reiterating Karna's saga through the conventional registers of tragedy, valor, or fate, Kane mobilizes the fictional character of Uruvi to reconstruct narrative authority itself. This conclusion argues that the novel constitutes a narratological intervention into myth, challenging patriarchal silences and reinscribing female voice, agency, and perspective into a story that has historically marginalized such subjectivities. In doing so, Kane demonstrates how mythological fiction can both preserve and subvert cultural memory, offering fresh insights into the dynamics of gender, silence, and storytelling.

At the heart of this intervention lies the narrative technique of focalization, which transforms Uruvi from a peripheral fictional creation into the novel's central consciousness. By employing both internal and external focalization, Kane resituates the epic within the psychological, ethical, and affective dimensions of Uruvi's experience. Internal focalization, as theorized by Genette (1980), enables readers to inhabit Uruvi's interiority: her conflicts, her affections, her disillusionments, and her quiet defiance. This shift is vital, for it displaces the lofty detachment of epic narration with an intimate, embodied subjectivity. Through Uruvi, the reader encounters Karna not as an archetypal hero, but as a fallible man, deeply haunted by loneliness and alienation. Similarly, her reflections upon marriage, kinship, and social belonging humanize the mythic grandeur of the Mahabharata, grounding it in the psychological realities of female experience.

Yet Kane does not abandon the technique of external focalization. At moments of heightened social performance—the swayamvara, confrontations within households, or subtle exchanges between rivals—the narration retreats into observational detail, allowing readers to reconstruct meaning through gestures, silences, and appearances. This oscillation between internal and external focalization achieves a narratological richness: Uruvi is not only a subject who perceives and judges, but also an object of observation, positioned within a matrix of social gazes. As Mieke Bal (1997) suggests, focalization is not a static tool but a dynamic play of perspectives that constructs power relations in narrative. By embedding Uruvi into both sides of this equation, Kane dramatizes the complexities of female subjectivity within patriarchal myth.

The act of granting Uruvi a voice where none existed before must be understood as a feminist narratological gesture. Silence, as theorists such as Gayatri Spivak (1988) remind us, is not a neutral absence but a consequence of epistemic violence—an enforced erasure of subaltern voices within dominant discourse. Uruvi's very invention resists this silence, functioning as a counter-narrative that not only supplements but also destabilizes the canonical Mahabharata. She is not merely an addendum to Karna's tale, but the axis through which his heroism is interpreted, his humanity judged, and his tragedy reframed. In this sense, Kane's narrative does not simply "retell" the epic but interrogates its gendered politics of voice and absence.

Moreover, Uruvi embodies what Hélène Cixous (1976) famously described as *écriture féminine*, a mode of writing that privileges multiplicity, affect, and embodiment over linear authority. Her narrative voice is imbued with contradictions—rational and emotional, defiant and submissive, intimate and distanced—which mirrors the fractured yet rich subjectivity often denied to women in myth. Karna himself recognizes this paradoxical vitality in her character, describing her as "an extraordinary creature of opposites." In centering such a voice, Kane exemplifies how mythological fiction can enact a feminist poetics, rewriting not only what is told but how it is told.

The significance of this narrative strategy extends beyond Uruvi as an individual character. By inscribing her perspective into the Mahabharata, Kane challenges the epic's original narrative authority, which has historically privileged divine, heroic, and patriarchal voices. In place of the deterministic unfolding of fate, Uruvi foregrounds the contingencies of choice, the ambiguities of love, and the intimate costs of loyalty. She questions not only Karna's decisions but also the very structures of kinship, caste, and honor that shape his destiny. In this way, Uruvi does not simply support or oppose Karna; rather, she serves as the lens through which the epic's moral universe is re-evaluated.

This narratological experiment carries broader implications for the genre of mythological fiction in Indian

English literature. Writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (*The Palace of Illusions*), Volga (*The Liberation of Sita*), and Anand Neelakantan (*Ajaya, Asura*) have also reimagined epics from marginalized perspectives, but Kane's choice to invent Uruvi rather than reclaim an existing female character represents a unique intervention. By creating a fictional woman whose existence is absent from the canonical text, Kane highlights the very silences embedded in epic tradition and uses fiction to expose those silences as sites of possibility. This move resonates with Linda Hutcheon's (1988) theory of historiographic metafiction, which destabilizes the boundaries between history, myth, and imagination in order to critique dominant narratives. In Kane's case, the metafictional act of inserting Uruvi underscores the constructedness of myth itself, reminding readers that epics are not sacred absolutes but living texts open to re-interpretation.

Furthermore, Kane's novel contributes to wider debates about authorship, gender, and cultural memory. By appropriating a patriarchal epic and reshaping it through feminist narratology, Kane asserts the right of women authors to engage critically with cultural inheritance. Her work suggests that myths are not untouchable relics but evolving narratives that must be continually interrogated if they are to remain relevant. In an age where the Mahabharata continues to influence politics, popular culture, and social discourse, such feminist reinterpretations are crucial in ensuring that the epic does not perpetuate exclusionary ideologies uncritically.

Thus, *Karna's Wife* is not only a literary retelling but also a critical intervention into myth-making, one that foregrounds the politics of silence, the dynamics of narrative perspective, and the possibility of alternative voices. Through Uruvi, Kane reclaims the margins of the Mahabharata and transforms them into a center of narrative authority. By blending myth with fiction, tradition with subversion, and epic detachment with psychological intimacy, Kane demonstrates how narratology can function as a tool of resistance, dismantling the hierarchies of voice that have long structured mythic discourse.

In conclusion, the narratological strategies employed in *Karna's Wife* illuminate the transformative potential of mythological fiction in contemporary literature. Uruvi's voice—at once fictional, feminist, and deeply human—becomes a metaphor for all suppressed voices seeking articulation within dominant cultural narratives. Her presence reminds us that myths are not immutable, but malleable texts that can be reinterpreted to reflect evolving understandings of gender, power, and identity. By turning silence into speech, Kane affirms that literature is not only an act of storytelling but also an act of cultural reimagination. In this sense, *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* is both a tribute to the epic tradition and a challenge to its exclusions, an acknowledgment of its grandeur and a reproof of its silences.

Ultimately, Kane's novel urges us to ask: whose stories have been lost in the shadows of epic canons, and what might we gain by listening to them anew? In posing and partially answering this question through Uruvi, Kane demonstrates that the work of literature is not simply to preserve cultural memory, but to contest, reshape, and enrich it. *Karna's Wife*, therefore, is more than a feminist retelling; it is a narratological act of reclamation, one that redefines the boundaries of myth and fiction while opening pathways for future explorations of gendered re-imaginings in Indian English literature.

### Summary

This paper takes a closer look at the re-visioning of the Mahabharata which Kavita Kane accomplished in *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, and how the utilization of narrative strategies reclaimed the female voice within epic discourse that was previously peripheral and alienated. Uruvi, indeed, is at the heart of this paper, whose narrative presence shakes the traditionally patriarchal skeleton of this epic. Kane repositions the gaze of narration, with a voice-over of heroic masculinity, onto the female subjectivity through tools such as focalization, interior monologue, and psychological depth to let Uruvi rise from being a peripheral figure to that of an articulate moral-emotional core of the book. The research thus examines the impact of this positioning act against dominant epic conventions for its narration and takes away the narrative authority from women who have conventionally been relegated to silence.

This research paper further analyzes the manner in which the imaginative arrival of Uruvi serves as a feminist practice and challenges the normative construction of definitions of gender and the boundaries of patriarchal definitions of dharma. Kane, in this context, where agency is given to the marginalized category of women, upsets the traditional definition of silence, which has been heretofore defined in epic traditions for a very long time. Uruvi's voice as the site of resistance opens the possibility of reconceiving the definition of the myth as the site of ethical and emotional definitions.

### Conclusion

Accordingly, the final argument of this research will be that the Mahabharata reinterpretation in terms of the feminism

within the novel Kane considers the Mahabharata itself also a work of literary resistance in the form of a work of culture because the novel renews the Mahabharata in a way that contradicts the patriarchal elements of the Mahabharata for the sake of a different mode of narration.

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