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Insignificant Micro-narratives - Repositioning *The Mahabharata* from Kavita Kane's Uruvi's Perspective

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Abstract

This paper will deal with the micro-narrative (a very short or specific narrative) of *The Mahabharata* from the perspective of an insignificant character while critically reading into Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife—the Outcast's Queen*. Kane's work is from the vantage point of Uruvi, who is supposedly Karna's second wife. The traditional narrative of *The Mahabharata* calls her by another name and it is this reason, among certain others, that casts a doubt on Uruvi's very existence. It explores how the chosen narrative differs from the traditional narrative. As the character taken into account is so insignificant a role that there is hardly any mention of the same in the traditional narrative, the chosen narrative will also be contrasted with an oppositional narrative, Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjaya—The Death Conqueror: The story of Karna*, which itself is a micro-narrative. This paper will also look into how far Kane has been successful in her venture to re-position the narrative, and to what extent the resultant work stays true to the traditional and the oppositional narratives in terms of representation of events, situations and other characters. Lastly, this paper will also look into seeing whether Kane delivers what she claims to do so through her book—whether the narrative entirely belongs to Uruvi, or if she is eventually reduced to a co-owner of the narrative.

Keywords: *Micro-Narrative, The Mahabharata, insignificant, narratives*

Insignificant Micro-narratives - Repositioning *The Mahabharata* from Kavita Kane's Uruvi's Perspective

Nayana George

Introduction

What is taken to be the most popular definition of an epic is given by M H Abrams in his *Glossary of Literary Terms*

In its strict sense the term epic or heroic poem is applied to a work that meets at least the following criteria: it is a long verse narrative on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race. Traditional epics (also called "folk epics" or "primary epics") were written versions of what had originally been oral poems about a tribal or national hero during a warlike age (76).

The Mahabharata is a Sanskrit epic poem that is mythological and didactic in nature. It is a heroic narrative that depicts the struggle for sovereignty between the Kauravas (the sons of Dhritarashtra, the descendant of Kuru) and the Pandavas (the sons of Pandu), which culminated in the great war at Kurukshetra. The authorship of the work is traditionally ascribed to the sage Vyasa, who is thought to be an ancestor of the Kauravas and the Pandavas.

The character that is central to the chosen narrative is Uruvi, who is Karna's second wife. Karna, the king of Anga, is one of the central characters in *The Mahabharata*. Wronged, oppressed and anguished from the very beginning, he fights from the side that was conventionally taken to be the one in the wrong, the black to the Pandavas' white, and is the right-hand man of Duryodhana, the chief of the Kauravas. Karna's micro-narrative itself is one that has been explored time and again, while that of his wife—especially his second wife—is a novel venture. Uruvi is a character that is shrouded in deep mystery. The questions of her origins, and even her very existence, do not have accurate answers. She is truly an insignificant character in the grand scheme of things in *The Mahabharata* as she has no direct involvement in any of the events that led up to the great war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Hence, it is certainly interesting to follow how a narrative from such a vantage point would play out. And so, this paper is about exploring this insignificant character in *The Mahabharata* while critically reading into Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife - the Outcast's Queen*.

This chosen narrative will be compared with the traditional narrative of C. Rajagopalachari's version of *The Mahabharata* (the original was by the sage Vyasa) as this is the version that Kavita Kane has referenced in her book *Karna's Wife—the Outcast's Queen* and also Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjaya—The Death Conqueror: The*

story of Karna, which will be treated as the oppositional narrative. As Karna's wives were hardly dealt with any importance in the traditional narrative of *The Mahabharata*, the decision to include Sawant's work, which has significant mentions of the wives, is to serve as a means of comparison.

The Character's Identity

Karna's second wife is a character about which not much has been talked about. She is a character that has not been featured in any recorded discourses, and hence, is a character with which Kavita Kane has taken a lot of liberty in portraying. The traditional narrative shows the second wife as belonging to the same caste as Karna who is a *sutputra*, i.e. one belonging to the charioteer caste. In the oppositional narrative, the second wife was named Supriya, "the Supremely Pleasing One" (Sawant 278) and was the *sakhi*, a very dear friend, of Duryodhana's wife, Bhanumati (277). The chosen narrative paints an entirely different portrayal of the second wife. In Kane's work, the second wife was Uruvi, the princess of Pukeya. Born into aristocracy, she was the "self-appointed" foster child of Kunti, the queen mother of the Pandavas (2). Kane waxes poetic about Uruvi, describing her as the "only daughter of the sixth King of Pukeya, the erudite Vahusha, and Queen Shubra; an heiress to her father's legacy, his intelligence, and her mother's flaming beauty". "Slender and petite, her loveliness was distracting, speciously masking her incisive wit" (8).

The name Uruvi could be a shortened version of the name "Ponnuruvi" which was mentioned in a Tamil retelling. Many scholars are of the opinion that the name was just an epithet for one of his wives. One cannot help but wonder why Kane chose to depict Uruvi as a princess. In the day and age where caste and status play a huge role, caste more so than status—considering that Karna was insulted for being a charioteer's son even when he was proclaimed as the king of Anga, Uruvi's depiction as a Kshatriya princess certainly raises a few questions. Perhaps her high social and economic status could be seen as attributes that grant her boosted grandeur to her image. Also, since the social practice of *Pratiloma*, wherein a woman of a higher caste marries a man of a lower caste, is frowned upon by the then society, her choice of marrying Karna could show the determination and the sacrifices that she had to embrace by going against social norms and marrying a "lesser" man. Uruvi's father even warns her that the act is equivalent to "a living death" (19).

The Chosen Character as the Protagonist

Both the traditional and the oppositional narratives hardly, if ever, centre the spotlight on the second wife. The chosen narrative, as expected, tries to show the second wife as the lead character. Kane extensively makes the use of dramatic license in depicting Uruvi according to the archetype, or rather, the stock character of a strong female. Stock characters have the tendency to be, as termed by E.M Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel*, "flat". Forster defines a flat character as one that is "constructed around a single idea or quality" (67) and Uruvi epitomizes the idea of being a "good wife". This archetype, as described by Jennifer Ellis in her article "Female Character Archetypes and Strong Female Characters", is similar in characteristics to those of "the nurturer

and the martyr". She further goes on to say that this character is often "tied up in caring for others", is willing to sacrifice themselves, and is often reduced to "a supporting character".

Uruvi is initially seen as the model daughter who is passionate and "too spirited to be restrained", and who possessed "a blithe audacity steeled with a stubborn resilience" (Kane 8). But that phase of hers hardly lasts when she is smitten with Karna, and then it becomes her aim to be his wife. Perhaps in Kane's zeal to show her as a character that is independent, strong-willed and fierce, Uruvi ends up as a one-dimensional woman whose only concern is being the perfect wife, and by association, the perfect daughter-in-law for her parents-in-law and the perfect co-wife to her husband's first wife. All the attributes that one could appreciate about her character seems to disappear once she is married, and that happens very early on in the book. Perhaps one reason for this could be that the narrative ceases to belong to only Uruvi. One can say that this narrative is as much Karna's as it is Uruvi's, perhaps even more of Karna than of Uruvi. Whether or not this was the ultimate intention of the author remains unclear as no inkling of the said intention is provided in the initial stages of approaching the work.

One of the major questions with which I approached this work was about how Kane would tie such an insignificant character with what unfolded in *The Mahabharata*, as she had no direct influence on what occurred. However, the author did manage to do exactly that—Uruvi comes to the horrific realization that the animosity between Karna and Arjuna and consequently, between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, was fostered by her decision to choose the former over the latter. "I made them adversaries" (98). Hence, the author puts the central character right under the spotlight by making her responsible, at least partly, for the war that changed the lives of many. There is a re-interpretation that occurs of the primarily androcentric tale. By making Uruvi the central character of this narrative, Kane indulges in re-imagining and re-telling the tale from a perspective that is tinged in femininity. There is a great focus on Uruvi's feminine roles of a daughter, wife, sister, daughter-in-law, and mother.

Inner spaces are given more prominence as it was considered to be a female domain. The author did not hold back in focusing on the intimate lives of women. The descriptions are soft, calm, and decidedly feminine. "The palace resembled a floral palanquin" (25) during Uruvi's wedding. "Deep turmeric yellow bridal silks", "the lotus-shaped marriage hall" (30) and "beautifully landscaped garden of fruit trees and scented creepers" (104) - these are a few of the ornate pictures she paints with the vivid imagery. Outer spaces, even the battleground during the Kurukshetra war, were never elaborately described with as much fervour as the inner ones. Also, through this narrative, we see the softer side of Karna that is scarcely mentioned in the other narratives. We see him in his role of a son, brother, husband, and father. We see him indulging in the give and take of affection, and even his relationship with the Kuru king Duryodhana is shown in a softer light. The oppositional narrative which is centred on him prefers to showcase his qualities of valour and bravery at the forefront; he was predominantly an anguished, burdened warrior.

Altered Representation of Other Characters

As is it Uruvi's narrative, it is only natural that the importance of certain other characters is downplayed to highlight her relevance in the narrative. But on comparing with the traditional and the oppositional narratives, it can be seen that Kane chose to portray a few characters—namely Vrushali, Draupadi, and Kunti—in a slightly different light as opposed to their conventional portrayal. It is to be noted that these characters are females and are intimately connected with Karna; Vrushali is his first wife, Draupadi is the woman who gravely insulted him at her *swayamvara* and it thought that he has strong, passionate feelings for her, and Kunti is his birth mother who abandoned him. It is as though these characters are presented as foils to Uruvi.

Vrushali

Vrushali is perhaps the most altered character here, as the images presented of her in the chosen and the oppositional narratives seem to belong to two different women. Kane sees her as “mild-mannered” and describes her as being “not a pretty woman” (50). On the other hand, Sawant description includes words like “lovely” and “beauty” and even depicts Karna as very eloquently thinking of Vrushali to be “certainly the first soft gently-released exhalation from the mouth of the world-maker Vishvakarma in his first sweet happy slumber”(77). Sawant's work showed her as keenly exercising her role as the first wife of Karna, with her being responsible for the functioning of the household. In Kane's work, it seemed that the baton was passed onto Uruvi while Vrushali was depicted as a jealous and dependent woman. Sawant portrayed Vrushali as someone who was mature and understanding, and who was adept at conversing with Karna about matters very complex in nature. She was also often seen as Karna's voice of reason.

Kane depicts the relationship between Uruvi and Vrushali as one of “cordiality lacking warmth” and the reason for that was perhaps the latter's “innate aloofness” (50). It was seen that most of Vrushali's comments towards Uruvi were tinted with “disapproval”, and that Vrushali was “cold yet polite, distant yet solicitous, greeting her but never making her feel welcome” (169). It was even said that Uruvi's relationship with Karna's brother was sour because of Vrushali (51). Sawant paints a different picture of the relationship between Vrushali and the second wife, called Supriya here. Vrushali had “resolved never to hurt Supriya” (278). Vrushali is confident in her husband's love for her and is far from being envious of the second wife. Vrushali thinks of Supriya to be “tactful”, “guileless”, and “gentle” (279).

Even the relationships between Karna and his two wives are presented in entirely different ways in the two aforementioned narratives. In Sawant's perspective, Karna unabashedly adores Vrushali and considers the relationship between them as one of “pure love” (190). He even waxes eloquent about how the mention of her very name brings about all his “sweet memories” (178). Kane's version of Karna, however, considered his marriage to Vrushali as a “duty, marked by a devotion which was an innate, instinctive part of his nature” (49). Their relationship is depicted as one wherein there is familiarity and respect, but no passion. There is even a tinge of

bitterness that creeps in when Vrushali talks about Karna— “First I lost him to Duryodhana, then to Draupadi... and finally, I lost him to you” (172).

Sawant hardly mentions anything about Karna and the second wife, Supriya, in a common setting and never in an intimate manner. While it can be assumed that Karna was fond of her, it was more or less explicitly stated that the marriage had been solemnized as it was a condition that Duryodhana’s wife had put forth before they got married (278). Kane’s version, predictably, shows Karna as being “mesmerized” and “entranced by her beauty and intelligence” (49). He even thought of Uruvi to be “like a goddess in the land of the ordinary” (66).

It can be clearly seen that the two authors have very different ideas about the two wives. Keeping in mind the traditional narrative, it can be inferred that Sawant was more accurate in his description of the wives and their relationships with each other and their husband. Kane is unmistakably biased in her treatment of the wives, but perhaps it can be overlooked when taking into account that the narrative is centred on Uruvi, and this was perhaps done to garner her more attention.

Kunti

The two works significantly differ in the way that Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, is portrayed. In Kane’s adaptation, Kunti and Uruvi have a special relationship between them where Kunti considers Uruvi to be like her child. It was thought to be a natural progression that Uruvi would eventually become her daughter-in-law. Even after Uruvi gets married to Karna, the women still retain their fondness for each other. However, all that changes when Uruvi accuses Kunti of being a shrewd, cunning, and “coldly calculating” person, and Kunti herself admits that her only aim was to regain her and her sons’ rights over the Kuru kingdom of Hastinapur. Uruvi further declares that Draupadi was a “weapon” used for the “sole purpose of bonding the brothers forever”. She claims that the realization made her see Kunti “in a new light” (159).

In Sawant’s rendition of the tale, Kunti and the second wife have no such affections between them; they are never suggested to be in the same setting. In fact, it is Vrushali that Kunti approaches, perhaps to know more about her abandoned son through Vrushali. There is even a depiction of an interaction between them where Kunti suggests naming Vrushali and Karna’s son as Vrishasena (286).

It can be seen that Kunti is just another foil to Uruvi in Kane’s version. This is especially evident in the later stages, where the accusations against Kunti glorify Uruvi and make it seem as though she was in the right all along.

Draupadi

Both the narratives have instances which show Draupadi lamenting the fact that she rejected Karna at her *swayamvara* in favour of marrying Arjuna, and later on, becoming the joint wife of the Pandavas. While that lamentation is only expressed once towards the end in Sawant’s version, Kane chooses to paint a picture of Draupadi as a pained woman who was forever yearning for the affections of Karna, thereby never able to wholly commit to her husbands. Draupadi even goes so far as to justify Karna’s

action of mocking her in the notoriously famous disrobing incident that dishonoured her to the very core at the court of Hastinapur in front of the Kauravas and the Pandavas and all their elders. She claims to have done “the same to Karna once” by insulting him, and that she had been “punished” for what she did to him (133).

Kane seems to project a kind of competition between the two princesses, Uruvi and Draupadi, for the affections of Karna. While Uruvi is tormented by the thoughts of Karna returning Draupadi’s romantic feelings, she is greatly relieved when Karna, time and again, reiterates that she is the object of his affections. This sense of one-upmanship that prevails in Kane’s rendition presents Draupadi as a foil to Uruvi as well.

The Significance of the Title

One of the very first questions that one can ask about the chosen narrative is about the title—why was it named *Karna’s Wife—the Outcast’s Queen*? Uruvi’s name is not mentioned in the title and instead, it is Karna’s name that takes the spotlight. While it is true that the intended audience will be familiar with Karna and hence be interested in the book, the fact remains that Kane’s choice of title is a hindrance to the very intention of her book, which was to make Uruvi’s story known.

Another aspect of the novel that is truly baffling is that while the author claims that the book is about Uruvi’s narrative, it so happens that eventually, the book is as much Karna’s narrative as it is Uruvi’s— if not more. Again, Kane lets Karna steal the thunder from Uruvi, and she is overshadowed by Karna’s looming presence. As mentioned before, Uruvi’s characteristic “flatness” renders here to be a caricature of the model wife; and it is Karna we see as the character that evolves throughout the narrative. Hence, it can be seen that there is a clear estrangement between what Kane claims the book to be about, and what trajectory the work has actually been led into.

Conclusion

There are a lot of aspects wherein the chosen narrative differs from the traditional and the oppositional narratives. And the degree of variation differs from aspect to aspect. Kane’s pursuit of exploring an insignificant character’s narrative must have been perilous indeed, especially since there was not much she could refer to. This might have been the reason as to why she liberally indulged in employing the dramatic license that resulted in her work being disconnected from the traditional narrative, and also in creating doubts in the readers’ mind about the character’s existence.

Keeping in mind the aforementioned statement, it is Karna’s perspective that accords this work any semblance of a connection to the traditional narrative. This is another reason as to why I think that Kane has not been successful enough in her endeavour to present the insignificant vantage point to the famous epic, as she had to use a significant one as a crutch to do the same. Also, with the change in the protagonist of the narrative came the change in the representation of certain characters. Vrushali, Kunti, and Draupadi are reduced to the function of being mere foils to Uruvi who, in

Kane's over-zealousness to present as the strong female protagonist, is eventually seen as a one-dimensional "flat" character.

It is quite interesting to note the way she decided to turn the spotlight onto such an insignificant character. The way Kane managed to make Uruvi think that she was the one responsible for the rivalry between Karna and Arjuna was quite ingenious. And this move might explain the reason why Uruvi was depicted as a Kshatriya princess who was Kunti's foster-daughter, as there was no way Arjuna would have had a romantic inclination nor any extended contact towards her otherwise. While there are imperfections in this particular venture, Kane sure does deserve praise to have undertaken the same. The work is noteworthy enough to stand disconnected from the traditional narrative and it beautifully conveys the story of a woman who tries to find her heaven on earth while being intimately in touch with a deeply anguished and oppressed man. This goes to show that insignificant characters cease being so once they are given voices and Kane has chosen to give Uruvi a very loud voice, indeed.

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