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UNEARTHING THE SILENT VOICES IN KAVITA KANE'S *KARNA'S WIFE: THE OUTCAST'S QUEEN*

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India has been dominated by class, caste and gender concerns throughout the ages. Gender and caste issues are ever-present in Indian society. The social environment, in which individuals are born and live, shapes their attitudinal, emotional and behavioral reactions and the perceptions about what is happening around. *Mahabharata*, one of the greatest epics in Indian literature still has got its relevance even in the present scenario as it presents the tale of numerous characters, their struggle to withstand all the troubles and teaches survival. Past, present and future are all reflected in the *Mahabharata*. The lives of the characters in the *Mahabharata* are closely interconnected with those of the lives of the people that one sees around in society.

Many writers have attempted to retell the great epic in various perspectives by choosing different characters; Kavitha Kane is one among them. But she has not chosen any central female character in the *Mahabharata*. Instead she narrates through the marginalized one. Kavitha Kane, known for writing Mythology-fiction like *Karna's Wife*, *Sita's Sister* and *Lanka's Princess* has given voice to the voiceless, to those who are marginalized in terms of caste, gender and by social norms.

Kavitha Kane, in her novel *Karna's Wife* explores the narrative epic from Uruvi's point of view and also gives voice to the marginalized characters in the *Mahabharata*. Uruvi, a Kshatriya princess is the only daughter of King Pukeya. Unlike other princess, she is independent, strong and a master in horse riding. She spends most of her time in healing and nursing the injured and the victims in war.

Kane here imparts a feminist account to the life of a woman looking into a man's world and fighting to live her life and save her family. Uruvi always dares to take bold decisions and is seen questioning the errors and the concepts of war. Through her perspective, Kane questions the rampant injustice and issues that remain untouched in Karna's life. Even though Uruvi knows that Karna belongs to a lower class community, overcoming all the obstacles, she marries Karna with the approval of her parents. Before her *Swayamwara*, she informs her father that she is in love with Karna. As Uruvi says:

"Father I could never marry a person you do not approve of. But it's also true that I cannot garland just any man at my swayamwara. For me, it is either Karna or no one. If I can't have him, I would rather stay unmarried". (KW, 18)

Her father threatens her only because he knows that the society will never allow him to keep his daughter unmarried and so at first he forbids her to marry a charioteer's son. King Pukeya says:

"Unmarried!" her father scoffed in sudden anger. You know that can never happen in the world we live in. Are you threatening me, child? Society will not permit me to keep you unmarried, nor will it allow you to marry a charioteer's son. You can't marry a half-cast. You wouldn't be as crazy as that. You are a Kshatriya girl- You cannot marry a sutaputhra!" (KW, 18)

Here one can see how society interferes in framing one's personal lives. Karna, the unsung hero in the *Mahabharata*, is marginalized for being the son of a charioteer even though he is a well-nurtured man and a good-hearted individual. Uruvi, here is a spokesperson for Karna's silenced and oppressed self. She justifies

the life of Karna by narrating the sufferings he had to undergo from his birth to death. Karna is the son of Kunti and Surya, the sun god; By birth he deserved the luxury of a prince but gets abandoned in life. He goes through rejections his whole life- first by his mother, then by his gurus and by the society. He always hungers for social respect and identity which has been denied to him and this is seen until his death. According to Kane in her interview, "Karna is one of the most adored, respected and tragic characters in Indian mythology whom all loved as the doomed and damned".

Caste seems to be the main hindrance that stood in the way of Karna, stopping his growth. Guru Dronacharya, the best teacher of martial arts in Hastinapur refused to teach him because he was not a Kshatriya even though he was a greater warrior than Arjuna. He was marginalized in the name of his caste, i.e, because he was a Sutaputhra and was turned down at the Hastinapur archery contest and rejected by Draupadi, Princess of Panchala at her swayamwara. From birth to death Karna was marginalized and questioned about his birth and lineage.

The stereotyped culture has oppressed all marginalized sections in the society especially women. The women characters like Uruvi, the one who marries Karna and Draupadi, the one who rejects him, have grown up in different cultures. Uruvi, a resistant character breaks all the rules and norms framed by the society with courage. In an instance when she reveals to her parents that she is in love with Karna, King Vahusha and Queen Shubhra react differently. Her father knows about her character, but her mother is more concerned about how society will receive this unsuitable union:

'We can't,' King Vahusha said, shrugging resignedly. 'We can't stop her thinking about him. We can't stop her from loving him. We can't do anything! She knows what she wants-and she knows exactly how to face the storm she has dared to churn up.'

But she has to behave according to her status, answered Queen Shubra heatedly. 'She has to realize her responsibility as a daughter and save herself from disgrace!' She wept bitterly. (KW,23)

Here it is visible that what the society demands is "honour" and family pride and not happiness or well-being for a woman. In the case of Draupadi, to save her brother's life (Dhrishtadyumna) she had to insult Karna and marry Arjuna. And what was the result of her sacrifice? She never leads a happy life and always longed for Karna.

Uruvi, the firm and strong character in the novel rebels against the social patriarchal system and questions the faults of other central characters like Karna, Kunti, Bhishma and Krishna and at the same time she accepts the flaws. She was not satisfied with the justification that was given for the concept of war as her prior concern was that war destroyed the peace and prosperity of the country.

Thus Uruvi throughout the novel resists the exploitive social systems and blind beliefs. She fought for the rights of the marginalized and gave importance to the well-being of others. At the end of the novel she rejects the offers given by the Pandavas. She refuses to go with them to Hastinapur which reveals her silent protest against the evil world of caste, status, wars and kingdoms. She decides to live a peaceful life on her terms without the constraints of the society.

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