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Re-Interpretation of The Side-lined Characters in Our Mythological Literature

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In today's dystopian world, retelling the epics in English serves a magnificent purpose of nation-building. Here in this world, one loses touch with one's own language and culture. The search for one's roots piques a great deal of interest in the retellings of myths that unite the nation and foster a sense of belonging. The re-visioning reverberates with the truth of life, breathing outside air into common place things. This fictional rhetoric has a significant impact on shaping the nation and determining individual densities. The retellings serve as beacons of light and a place for the nation to consider an optimistic future.

In the above process, Kavita Kane has written a number of books in this style of telling Indian myths from a new perspective. The author is "famous for writing on lesser-known female characters from the Indian mythology." In one of her interviews with the Times of India, Kavita Kane mentions, "the narrative changes the moment the spotlight falls on them and most of my protagonists have been either minor or overlooked characters." (1)

The present paper demonstrates that the reworking of myths is a universal and timeless practice.

It is very much interesting to remember what **Raja Rao** writes in praise of woman in his famous novel, *The Serpent and The Rope*:

“Woman is the earth, air, ether, sound: woman is the microcosm of the mind, and articulations of space, the knowing in knowledge; the woman is fire; the movement clear and rapid as mountain stream; the woman is that which seeks against that which is sought. To Mitra she is Varuna, to Indra she is Agni, to Rama she is Sita, and to Krishna she is Radha.....” (2)

Some characters to which we are familiar in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and many mythological tales as well, such as *Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, Ravana, Arjuna, Kunti, Bhishma* and many more. But there are two characters from *Kavita Kane's Karna's Wife –The Outcast's Queen* and *Lanka's Princess* to whom we all need to be introduced and they are Uruvi, second wife of Karna, Vrushali, the first of Karna and Meenakshi, who is popularly known as Shurpanakha.

Although Uruvi is not mentioned significantly by the original writer *Veda Vyasa* in the *Mahabharata*, Kavita not only appropriately portrays her in the book, but gives much importance to her. It seems to be man's dominance and woman's subordination are portrayed in our Vedas and Puranas.

Taking clue from the *Mahabharata* itself, Kavita in her present novel sketches Uruvi as the princess of Pukeya. While talking about Uruvi's physical appearance she says:

“...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. Though the burning fire in her eyes, the warmth of her smile....” (3)

Princess Uruvi has a tender heart and she believes in serving elders, poor and nursing the torn limbs and blooded bodies of wounded soldiers.

In the present novel the writer also informs us of Uruvi's parenting and her loving behaviour with everyone in Pukeya, her motherland and as well as in Hastinapur. As time passes Uruvi becomes young and her parents start thinking about her marriage, but there is something else in the fate of Uruvi.

“As a young woman in love, Uruvi saw in Vasusena all the qualities of a hero who was not being permitted to be one. His flaws made him more interesting.” (4)

The personality of Uruvi is an enchanting combination of beauty and love. Though she does not know anything about Karna but completely assured that he would accept her. Being a bold woman she has no fear of criticism. As an intelligent girl, she gives importance to the merits not to the caste or class. For the fulfilment of her desire she is ever ready to accept any hurdle or the consequences of her choice.

Uruvi was so confident in love with Karna that she makes a joke of Arjun in front of Kunti-Arjuna's mother, when Karna and Arjuna face off each other first time in Hastinapur.

It is easy to fall in love but difficult to convince others. As a father Vahusha cares for the life of his daughter and says: "Do you realise the consequences?" he muttered in utter desperation. 'Not for me, nor your mother, but for yourself. If you marry him, you will marry doom.' (5)

She also takes stand for Karna in front of his father when he says that Karna is a wrong man for her.

"No, not the wrong man, the wronged man", she corrected him immediately. 'A good man trapped in a bad situation...' (6)

She cannot hurt her parents for any reason because she loves them. However, she is aware that she will fail them now that she wants to marry Karna, but "being Karna's wife was now her only aspiration, the only aim that gave meaning to her life." And when she tells her parents about her decision, there is a great hustle between Uruvi and her parents. King Vahusha's world hurtles down on him.

He shows the present and future consequences of this marriage to his daughter and he presents a traditional rule in front of Uruvi and that rule is *Anuloma* and *Pratiloma*:

"*Anuloma* or the practice of marrying man of higher caste is legitimate. But you are well aware that the reverse practice of *pratiloma*, that of marrying a man of lower caste, is prohibited by the *shastras*. Karna is a *sutaputra*- the son of a suta- one who is born of a brahmin woman and a *Kshatriya* father" (7)

When Uruvi tells her parents that she wants to marry Karna, all they can do is tell her what will happen and try to persuade her in any way they can to change her mind. Her father says, "it will be no life for a *kshatriya* princess. It's a living Death!" (8)

Uniquely, the author conveys the inner feelings of a girl who is brave enough to make a choice. Father is somehow attempting to persuade her using a variety of examples: “Have you ever heard of any *suta* being offered a Brahmin or a *Kshatriya* bride? That was the reason why the Princess of Panchala, Draupadi, rejected Karna at their *swayamwara* – for being a *sutaputra*, which makes him low in a social hierarchy.”

In her *Swayamwara*, Uruvi chooses Karna among all the kings, princes and many others shattering the dreams of all boys present there. Arjuna, who was sure for his selection is also surprised of the choice of Uruvi. He says ‘Is that her choice? A lowly upstart, a Pariah, an unwelcome outsider? His voice was glacial.’ (9)

Vrushali is Karna’s first wife. She is depicted as a woman who is very patient and calm. She only has one reaction when she learns that her husband is now married for a second time. ”If he is going to be happy, so be it.” (10)

She warmly accompanies the newlyweds and does not express any displeasure during their reception. According to Shona, brother of Karna, “as his wife you are the one who is the most affected, yet you accept the situation so calmly!” (11)

Vrushali believes Uruvi, but also thinks that she does not feel comfortable with her, not out of hate, but rather because she is “... of her own sense of guilt for intruding in the older woman’s marital paradise.” (12).

The irony is that they remain stubbornly unfamiliar, two strangers under the same roof, sharing and loving the same man.

Although Uruvi is aware that she would eventually lose Karna for good, she does not want it to happen too soon. She sobs. “ I fear I am going to lose you forever. But I don’t want to lose you before the time comes. I am afraid. I am so scared I have already lost you. And by pushing you away, I am doing exactly that. Damn my rules and my moralizing...! I care more for you than ever and I want you with me. I am sorry for what I put you through...it was pride, it was my foolishness. I can’t go on without you anymore!”(13)

For a longer period of time, Uruvi pretends not to care about Karna, but at last she reveals her feelings of agitation, loss, and love.

Upon Karna's passing away, Uruvi makes the decision to remain in his house and look after Vrushali and Karna's elderly parents. She refuses when the Pandavas and Krishna beg her to travel to Hastinapur, where she rightfully belongs as Karna's wife. Her will to care for Karna's family, whom he has left behind, despite her personal pains, show great strength in the face of sadness and misery. Out of grief, Vrushali commits suicide. A few years later, her in-laws Radha and Adhiratha also pass away. Following everything, Uruvi makes the decision to return to Pukeya, where she grew up, and look after her elderly parents. Vrishakethu, her son, was guided by the Pandavas and Krishna. He becomes a great warrior like his father Karna, filling Uruvi with pride.

In the next novel Lanka's princess, Surpanakha, Ravana's sister who is commonly referred to as the lustful demon, is the subject of our interest. Kavita tells the story from Surpanakha's perspective, showing how her problems, hurts and losses lead her to act negatively. The general assumption that her character is solely evil is pivotally changed by this viewpoint.

The story begins with Rishi Vishrava and Kaikesi, an *asura* princess, giving birth to Meenakshi. The Rishi abandons his first wife and son Kubera because Kaikesi entices him. Kaikesi wants to oust Kubera from Lanka's throne, for which she needs powerful and wise offspring. She has three sons Ravana, Kumba and Vibishana, so her plan works. Kaikesi dislikes the fourth child that is daughter from the time she has been born, "This girl had cheated me of my plans"(14). It seems that the modern world's conventional belief that sons are required for family conflict resolution was in vogue at that time as well.

Simone de Beauvoir in her monumental work *The Second Sex* explains this attitude towards women by asserting that, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (15).

Thus Shurpanaka is seen again and again in his own clan as a powerless "other". There is a society that calls a woman "the other". Otherness in this context refers to the differences that become the basis for inferior treatment. More broadly, the term refers to the marginality they experience as a result of that "other" process that operates in many situations, when a woman is separated from a man because of her gender difference, divisions of race, culture, hierarchy, and birth within the family further marginalize women.

Meenakshi's pet lamb was killed by Ravana when she is a child, which enrages her and leads to a fight with her brother. In an attempt to defend herself and seek justice for killing her pet Shurpanaka punches a claw Ravana, which results in her name being changed from Meenakshi to

Shurpanaka – Ravana’s demon, reflecting the patriarchal phobia of a strong and confident woman. But he appropriates the name, saying: “If it could protect me, I am Shurpanaka.” (16) Furthermore, she says: “Yes, I am a monster!” (17).

Although there was always company made to smoothen her voice, Shurpanaka generally figures out how to root herself as a solid and decisive person. This is also evident in the incident in which Kubera, her stepbrother, tries to demonstrate his power by focusing on her femininity in order to provoke her brothers, particularly Ravana, but fails spectacularly when she fights back rather than giving in and retaliates vigorously with her weaponry nails; demonstrating her identity by completely accepting herself.

Not only does this displace Ravana and Kubera, it doubly displaces Shurpanaka because she is a girl. For example, at the age of five, she enters the battle to save Vibhishan. But instead of praising her, her mother attacks her saying, “Vibhishan is a boy and he is older than you. He does not need your protection!” (18)

The name Surpanakha conjures up images of a wicked, lustful demon. She is portrayed as a dishonest manipulator and has a strong dislike for her character. In one of her interviews, Kavita, explains why she has chosen Surpanakha’s character thus: “Society is always ridiculous to her. We take her role lightly when in fact she is such a crucial character. And then she has been sidelined through the rest of the epic, whereas her brother Ravana is more fleshed out. I want to humanise her and make her real to people”.(19)

The general presumption that Surpanakha is evil, now shifted by this viewpoint. She is named Meenakshi by her biological parents Kaikesi and Vishrava. With her three brothers Ravana, Kumba and Vibishan, she grows up. She marries Vidyujiva against her family’s wishes, but a family plot causes her to lose him. Vidyujiva is blamed for usurping Ravana’s high position and is killed. Surpanakha, is distraught and decides to exact revenge on Ravana and sets out with her son Kumar further than Dandak forest. She also loses her son in an unnecessary incident. She manipulates Rama and becomes the focal character to start the war between them. She continues to be the primary cause of the Ravana clan’s apocalypse.

When Surpanakha sees Rama and Lakshmana in the Dandak forest she is physically drawn to them. When she tries to approach them, they turn her down. In her rage she tries to harm Sita. She was mutilated by Lakshmana in retaliation .It is believed that Surpanakha is the manipulator who started the war. She is portrayed as malicious and her lust is brought to the forefront. Because

Surpanakha wants Sita to be abducted, Ravana kidnaps her. He never pays attention to the council of his better half Mandodhari and a few others. He is unaware of the desire of Surpanakha that starts the war. The desire of a man is acknowledged by society, but woman's sensibility is not. In society it is considered a taboo for women to express their physical needs.

Surpanakha is always seen as a lustful demon, but the author says, "Every character has shades of grey and they made you think and question".

Kavita gives the demon a human face. The two powerful characters in the Ramayana, Sita and Surpanakha, always present with striking differences: Sita is holy and pure while Surpanakha is evil and impure. Lakshmana incidentally kills Kumar, Surpanakha's son, in a combat. Surpanakha goes to Ayodhya in disguise after the war to exact vengeance on Lakshmana. She spares and pardons Lakshmana even though she has opportunity to kill his child. Her willingness to forgive demonstrates her humanity. At last, she suffocates herself in the sea with regret.

Conclusion:

The most underappreciated aspect of our Indian mythologies can be found in these works by Kavita Kane. Her portrayal of the female characters, Uruvi, Vrushali and Meenakshi, possess numerous traits from which we can learn a great deal. The characters show a variety of traits, such as being strong willed, obligated, inventive and unwavering. Uruvi is depicted as the character who is so determined to have Karna in her life that no one can stop her. She chooses to marry Karna despite knowing what her life will be like after marriage and will remain faithful to him until her last breath. When Karna dies in the battle, Uruvi is depicted as a heroic woman who takes care of the family without remembering her own troubles. She provides his parents a solid foundation.

The portrayal of a strong female character expressing her physical desire is a welcome note in the works of Kavita. The retelling of these age old stories with a new perspective by Kavita represents the grieved side of the female characters, making the readers believe that these characters are "more sinned against than sinning".

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