

## Subverting the Silence: A Study of Intellectual Agency and Female Empowerment in the Select Novels of Kavita Kane

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**Abstract:** Subverting the Silence explores the intersection of intellectual agency and female empowerment within the mythological retellings of Kavita Kane. While traditional Indian epics have historically positioned women at the margins—primarily defined through their relationships to male protagonists—Kane’s narratives enact a radical re-centering of female subjectivity. By foregrounding marginalized figures such as Uruvi, Urmila, and Menaka, Kane reconstructs these women as intellectually autonomous individuals capable of critical thought, ethical reasoning, and independent decision-making.

This study examines how Kane mobilizes intellectual and epistemic agency as tools of resistance against patriarchal structures embedded in mythological traditions. Moving beyond conventional representations of empowerment rooted in physical rebellion, Kane’s protagonists assert power through dialogue, introspection, and moral critique. Using feminist literary criticism and close textual analysis, this paper demonstrates how Kane’s narratives recover silenced voices and reinterpret mythological frameworks to align with contemporary feminist discourse.

Ultimately, the study argues that Kane’s works function as literary interventions that challenge historical erasure, redefine female agency, and reclaim women’s intellectual presence within the Indian literary canon. Through these retellings, silence is not merely broken but transformed into a powerful site of resistance and rearticulation.

**Keywords:** Intellectual Agency, Female Empowerment, Mythological Retellings, Feminist Criticism, Epistemic Agency.

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### Introduction

Mythology has long served as a foundational framework for shaping cultural values, moral codes, and social hierarchies. In the Indian context, epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana continue to influence societal perceptions of duty, honor, gender roles, and ethical conduct. However, these canonical narratives have often been critiqued for their androcentric bias, wherein female characters are relegated to secondary roles and defined largely in relation to male protagonists.

Women in these texts frequently function as symbols—of virtue, sacrifice, or temptation—rather than as fully realized individuals with independent voices. Their inner lives, intellectual capacities, and moral dilemmas are either minimized or entirely omitted. This structural silencing reflects broader patriarchal ideologies that have historically marginalized women’s contributions to cultural and literary traditions.

In response to these limitations, contemporary authors have begun to revisit and reinterpret mythological narratives from alternative perspectives. Among these writers, Kavita Kane has emerged as a significant voice in feminist mythological retellings. Her works challenge traditional narrative hierarchies by shifting

the focus from male heroes to female characters who were previously overlooked or silenced.

Novels such as *Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen*, *Sita’s Sister*, and *Menaka’s Choice* exemplify this approach. By centering the experiences of Uruvi, Urmila, and Menaka respectively, Kane reconstructs these characters as intellectually and emotionally complex individuals. Her narratives not only recover suppressed voices but also interrogate the ideological assumptions embedded within traditional texts.

This paper seeks to examine how Kane’s retellings foreground intellectual agency as a key dimension of female empowerment. It argues that her protagonists resist patriarchal constraints not through overt rebellion alone but through critical reasoning, ethical reflection, and the assertion of personal autonomy. By analyzing Kane’s narrative strategies and characterizations, the study highlights how mythological retellings can serve as powerful tools for feminist reinterpretation and cultural critique.

## Methods (Methodology and Theoretical Framework)

This study adopts a qualitative interpretative methodology grounded in feminist literary criticism. It combines theoretical analysis with close textual reading to examine how narrative structures, character development, and thematic concerns contribute to the representation of female agency.

### Theoretical Framework

#### The analysis is informed by key feminist theoretical perspectives:

Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "the Other": Beauvoir argues that women have historically been defined in opposition to men, positioned as secondary and dependent beings. This framework is particularly relevant to mythological narratives, where female identities are often constructed in relation to male heroes.

Elaine Showalter's gyno criticism: Showalter emphasizes the importance of studying women's writing as a distinct literary tradition. Her approach encourages the recovery of female voices and the examination of how women authors represent women's experiences differently.

Adrienne Rich's concept of "re-vision": Rich defines re-vision as the act of looking back at old texts with new critical perspectives. Kane's retellings can be understood as acts of re-vision that challenge and reinterpret established narratives.

Together, these frameworks provide a foundation for analyzing how Kane reconstructs mythological women as agents of knowledge and power.

### Data Selection

The study focuses on three primary texts:

- Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen (2013)
- Sita's Sister (2014)
- Menaka's Choice (2015)

These works were selected because they represent diverse mythological contexts and offer rich insights into different dimensions of female agency.

### Analytical Approach

The research employs close reading to analyze:

- Narrative voice and perspective
- Representation of female consciousness
- Dialogues and monologues as expressions of agency
- Ethical and philosophical reflections within the text

This approach enables a detailed examination of how Kane's characters articulate resistance and negotiate power within patriarchal structures.

## Results

### Intellectual Agency in Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen

Kane's portrayal of Uruvi represents a significant departure from traditional narratives. In the Mahabharata, Uruvi is a marginal figure with little narrative presence. Kane reimagines her as a central character who exercises intellectual independence and moral courage.

Uruvi's decision to marry Karna is not driven by romantic idealism alone but by a conscious rejection of caste hierarchies. Her assertion that she values individual merit over social status reflects a critical engagement with societal norms. This act of choice becomes a defining moment of intellectual agency.

Throughout the novel, Uruvi questions the ethical decisions of male characters and challenges the legitimacy of authority. Her refusal to accept injustice highlights her commitment to moral reasoning. Importantly, her resistance is articulated through dialogue and reflection rather than physical confrontation, emphasizing the power of intellectual dissent.

Her critique of blind loyalty further underscores her agency. By distinguishing between righteousness and obedience, she redefines the concept of duty. This reinterpretation challenges the patriarchal expectation that women must remain silent and submissive.

### Emotional Intelligence and Silent Strength in Sita's Sister

In Sita's Sister, Kane shifts the focus to Urmila, whose story has been largely ignored in traditional versions of the Ramayana. By exploring Urmila's experiences, Kane highlights form of agency that are often overlooked, particularly emotional resilience and introspection.

Urmila's decision to remain in Ayodhya while Lakshmana accompanies Rama into exile is reframed as an act of conscious choice rather than passive acceptance. She challenges the assumption that physical action is superior to emotional endurance.

Her role within the palace involves managing complex political and familial dynamics, demonstrating her capacity for strategic thinking and leadership. Through her character, Kane expands the definition of heroism to include acts of care, stability, and emotional labor.

Urmila's narrative also emphasizes the importance of self-awareness. Her introspective reflections reveal a deep understanding of her circumstances and her role within them. This intellectual engagement transforms her from a peripheral figure into a central agent of meaning.

### Autonomy and Identity in Menaka's Choice

Kane's reinterpretation of Menaka challenges her traditional portrayal as a divine seductress. Instead, Menaka is presented as a complex individual grappling with questions of identity, autonomy, and purpose.

The novel explores the tension between duty and desire, highlighting Menaka's struggle to assert her individuality within the constraints imposed by divine authority. Her rejection of being treated as an instrument reflects a broader critique of objectification.

By reimagining her relationship with Vishwamitra as mutual and emotionally significant, Kane humanizes both characters and challenges reductive interpretations. Menaka's journey becomes one of self-discovery, as she seeks to define her identity beyond societal expectations.

This emphasis on autonomy underscores the importance of self-definition as a form of empowerment.

## Narrative Strategies and Feminist Reclamation

Across these novels, Kane employs narrative techniques that foreground female consciousness. These include:

- Interior monologues that reveal characters' thoughts
- Dialogues that challenge authority
- Reinterpretation of key mythological events

These strategies enable Kane to reconstruct mythological narratives from within, transforming them into spaces of feminist critique. By filling the silences in traditional texts, she reclaims women's voices and repositions them at the center of storytelling.

## Discussion

The analysis reveals that Kane's works redefine empowerment by emphasizing intellectual and epistemic agency. Her protagonists do not merely resist oppression; they reinterpret the frameworks that sustain it.

This approach aligns with feminist theories that prioritize voice, representation, and critical engagement. By foregrounding women's perspectives, Kane challenges the authority of traditional narratives and exposes their limitations.

Furthermore, her retellings demonstrate the adaptability of mythology. Rather than being fixed and unchangeable, mythological narratives can be reinterpreted to reflect contemporary values and concerns.

Kane's works also contribute to broader discussions about literary canon formation. By reclaiming marginalized voices, she expands the scope of Indian literature and challenges exclusionary practices.

Ultimately, her narratives function as acts of cultural and intellectual resistance, transforming silence into expression and marginalization into empowerment.

## Conclusion

Kavita Kane's novels represent a significant contribution to feminist mythological literature. Through her reinterpretations, she restores narrative agency to women who were historically silenced.

Her characters demonstrate that empowerment is not limited to physical action but encompasses intellectual autonomy, emotional resilience, and ethical reasoning. By subverting traditional narratives, Kane challenges patriarchal structures and redefines the role of women within mythology.

In doing so, she not only recovers lost voices but also reshapes the cultural imagination, ensuring that women's perspectives are recognized as integral to storytelling.

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