

# Socio-Psychological Problems of the Protagonist in Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. An Analytical Study\*

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## Abstract

This paper explores the socio-psychological problems of the protagonist in Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, discoursing the causes for the socio-psychological problems that the marginalised were subjected to in the epic era. This research aims to study the-then social conditions and analyse how they cause the trauma in the psyche of the protagonist. While the Freudian psychological approach interprets that the causes for the psychological distress are to be searched for in the unconscious minds, the Marxist approach asserts that they are to be seen in the then-material conditions of social life. So, the Marxist literary critical approach is necessary for carrying out this research, tracing the dialectical relationship between the human psyche and the then-contemporary social relations. It is asserted that the social discriminations would adversely cause socio-psychological problems among individuals and it was true in the case of Karna, too.

**Keywords:** Social discriminations, group marriages, pairing marriages, monogamous marriages, lower social identity, disturbed psyche.

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\* Artículo de reflexión.

# Problemas sociopsicológicos de la protagonista de *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, de Kavita Kane.

## Un estudio analítico

### Resumen

Este artículo estudia los problemas sociales y psicológicos del protagonista de la novela *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* de la escritora india Kavita Kane. Para ello, se revisan las causas de los problemas sociales y psicológicos de los marginados en la literatura de la era épica de la India. Por esto, este artículo presenta una investigación sobre las condiciones sociales que causan un trauma en la mente del protagonista. Para acercarse al problema se hace una revisión desde el psicoanálisis freudiano donde se determina que el malestar y la angustia surgen de causas inconscientes. Por otro lado, se acude al marxismo para determinar que el trauma emerge de las condiciones materiales de la vida social. Se encuentra que la crítica literaria marxista es iluminadora a la hora de entender al protagonista de la obra ya que se comprende la relación dialéctica entre la psiquis y las relaciones sociales. Finalmente, se concluye que las discriminaciones sociales causan, de manera adversa, los problemas psicológicos como se puede ver en la novela de Kavita Kane que el artículo estudia.

**Palabras clave:** discriminaciones sociales, matrimonios en grupo, matrimonios en pareja, matrimonios monógamos, identidad social inferior, psique perturbada.

# Problemas sócio-psicológicos do Protagonista em Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. Um estudo analítico

## Resumo

Este artigo estuda os problemas sociais e psicológicos do protagonista do romance *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* da escritora indiana Kavita Kane. Também são analisados os motivos dos problemas sociais e psicológicos dos proscritos na literatura da era épica indiana. Portanto, este artigo apresenta uma pesquisa sobre as condições sociais que causam traumas na mente do protagonista. A fim de abordar o problema, é desenvolvida uma revisão da psicanálise freudiana, onde se determina que o desconforto e a angústia surgem de causas inconscientes. Por outro lado, o marxismo é usado para determinar que o trauma emerge das condições materiais da vida social. Assim, constata-se que a crítica literária marxista é esclarecedora quando se trata de compreender o protagonista da peça, uma vez que a relação dialética entre a psique e as relações sociais é compreendida. Por fim, conclui-se que as discriminações sociais causam os problemas psicológicos de forma adversa, como pode ser visto no romance de Kavita Kane.

**Palavras-chave:** discriminações sociais, casamentos grupais, casamentos de casal, casamentos monogâmicos, identidade social inferior, psique perturbada.

## Introduction

The hierarchical caste system has long been afflicting the minds of the marginalised in the Indian sub-continent impacting their psyches. Though the practice of untouchability was abolished by the Indian government soon after India became independent, the Dalits are still subject to social evictions and humiliations in India. The most backward caste people are also not being treated fairly even under democracy. Even when an upper caste person marries a lower caste person, the upper caste person is subject to expulsion by their family and relatives, while the lower caste person, on some occasions, is subjected to violence. It is this bitter social reality that is still evident in Indian society. So, it can be imagined how the individuals with the so-called 'low' social status were subject to humiliations in the ancient caste-ridden Indian society. As the objective of this paper is to study and analyse the socio-psychological problems of the protagonist in the novel *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, the discourse is limited to the analysis of the problems of the protagonist depicted in various contexts and the historical, social causes behind such issues.

The novel's plot, a retelling of the Mahabharata, is set in the "age of transition" between the Vedic era and the post-Vedic era. It is the age that has marked the social stratification of people into Varnas. According to *Purusha Suktam*, a verse of the *Rigveda*, people born out of "one primordial being" are of four Varnas (N. Joshi). Brahmins are born from the head of the primordial being, Kshatriyas from the shoulders, Vysyas from the thighs and Shudras from the feet. There is no mention of the birth of Dalits, who were then called by several names such as Nishadas, Panchamas, etc., and they were categorised as "Avarnas", which means outcasts or the casteless. According to Hindu mythology, this stratification of people is done by Manu, and so it is propagated as the Manu code by religious authorities. Though the induction of the Varna system was initially intended to free a "Varna citizen" (N. Joshi) from too many chores in social production, in the later ages, this practice had been used as a tool by the dominant to suppress and rule the ordinary. The people were coerced, under the Varna system, to adhere strictly to the Manu code. The Varna people were frightened that they, too, would become outcasts unless they clung to their allotted socio-economic duties under the Varna system. Furthermore, the Vedic religion (then it was not yet termed as the Hindu religion) also asserted that those who cross the drawn lines of the Varna system are not eligible for attaining the Moksha, the eternal liberation from the cyclical human life. It is in this socio-religious milieu that the story of the Mahabharata is believed to have taken place.

Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* is a retelling of the epic Mahabharata, which is believed to have been written by the sage Veda Vyasa. Historians believe that the Mahabharata that had been retold by people for several ages was composed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE or earlier (N. Joshi). The epic has been rewritten in several generations since then by several scholars. Between 1919 and 1966, the *Poona edition of the Mahabharata* with 19 volumes in 13000 pages was written by the scholars at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune, India (News18). This world-renowned epic was also translated into English and several regional languages in India. Kisari Mohan Ganguli translated it

into English and published it between 1883 and 1896. Aside from the enormous efforts of bringing the epic closer to the larger public, several scholars and authors wrote it in its condensed form or novel genre. The eminent freedom fighters of India, C. Rajagopalachari and K.M. Munshi, also wrote and published the Mahabharata in prose version. Kavita Kane, in 2013, wrote the story of Karna –one of the central characters in the Mahabharata– as a novel with a contemporary sensibility, viewing and weighing the incidents in the epic from the perspective of a fictitious character, Uruvi.

The writer retells the story, making Karna the protagonist and Uruvi, Kunti, and Draupadi as the other central characters. While Karna craves a justifiable social identity, his biological mother, Queen Kunti, fears to reveal the truth publicly that Karna is her son being fathered by the sun god (Lord Surya) with the help of a divine mantra before her marriage with King Pandu of Hastinapur. Uruvi, the princess of Pukeya Kingdom, chooses Karna in her swayamvara –a royal ceremony where the princess of the kingdom weds a king whom she likes–. Behind the severe psychological problems of Karna, there are sociological aspects that have caused his disturbed psyche.

### **The Manu Code-Problems of the Marginalised Protagonist**

The problems of Karna begin ever since he was born to Kunti, an unmarried princess who begets him with the sun god with the help of a divine mantra. Fearing to disclose the secret of the birth of her illegitimate child, she wraps the child, put it in a box and leaves it afloat on the river. Athiratha, the charioteer in the army of Hastinapur, happens to get the child and gives it to his wife, Radha. They are delighted, as they have been childless, to have got the beautiful child. Under their loving and affectionate care, Karna becomes a virtuous person. He becomes an extraordinary archer with his single-minded devotion, but he fails to achieve social status on par with his friend and his foes.

According to the Manu code, inter-caste marriages were prohibited. The practice of intra-caste marriages was institutionalised and strictly administered. If anyone crosses the socially drawn lines, they are subject to severe punishments such as social eviction, corporal punishment and several other forms of retribution. According to Bojja Tarakam, a famous progressive writer and social activist, this conformist ideology had been propagated by the orthodox religion and reinforced strongly by State. The cases in which the religion failed were dealt with by State administrative forces who usually awarded severe punishments to those who crossed the drawn lines (Tarakam).

Karna undergoes humiliating experiences due to several social and religious restrictions. The existing marriage system is an underlying cause for the miserable low social status of the protagonist. Very complex marriage relations were in vogue during the age of the Mahabharata. The people much more religiously and rigorously practised adherence to the Manu code during this period. For example, a Brahmin is allowed to marry a woman of Kshatriya or Vysya. However, he is not permitted to marry a Sudra woman. If that particu-

lar Brahmin is adamant about the marriage, the Sudra woman must consent to the marriage but the Brahmin, after his marriage with the Sudra woman, loses his priesthood status.

Similarly, when a Kshatriya marries a woman of other Varnas, he loses his Kshatriya status. If a Kshatriya marries a Brahmin woman, their progeny become "Sutas" who are not treated equally on par with Kshatriyas and thereby, they are not eligible to marry Kshatriyas. The Sutas, therefore, were kept away from state administrative duties. Swami Harshananda says that the Sutas were offered low-level duties such as "driving the chariot of the king, cooking for the king, taking care of king's elephants and horses, practising as doctors" (par. 1). It is due to these socio-religious practices that Karna, though a skilled archer, has undergone several difficulties in his life.

### **Refused to be Taught by Guru Dronacharya**

Karna aspires to become a disciple of Guru Drona, but he is refused to be taught by him due to his low social identity as a "Suta", even though he is extraordinarily talented to his age. However, Karna achieves the mastery of archery by practising in front of a clay statue of Guru Dronacharya. The practice of social discrimination by Dronacharya sows seeds of professional jealousy in Karna's mind against Arjuna, one of the Pandavas.

### **Humiliated at the Archery Tournament**

Another colossal blow that Karna receives is at the archery tournament in Hastinapur arranged by Bhishma Pitamaha, "the royal patriarch of Hastinapur to show up the archery skills of his great grandnephews" (Kane 1) –the Kauravas, the hundred sons of King Dhritarashtra and the Pandavas, the five sons of King Pandu–. When Arjuna performs his archery skills and wins the applause of the gathering, Karna intrudes upon the royal venue of the tournament and announces that he could perform and excel in every feat with the bow and arrow with more extraordinary skills than those of Arjuna. On seeing Karna, Kunti, from the gallery, identifies him as her first-born-child with the sun god. Karna performs his skills and "surpasses each of Arjuna's feats" (Kane 3). Later the competition goes on to the extent that both of them get ready for a duel. However, Kripacharya intervenes, saying that only the Kshatriyas are allowed to take part in the tournament. He further states that Arjuna is a Kshatriya and questions Karna about who he is. Karna bends his head in shame at the disgraceful enquiry of Guru Kripacharya. Duryodhana, the eldest son of king Dhritarashtra, intervenes and argues in favour of Karna. He not only objects to the words of Kripacharya but also makes Karna the king of Anga. However, when Athiratha enters the tournament venue, Karna's identity is known to all. Flinging the insulting words, Bhima humiliates Karna, saying that Karna is neither a prince nor a warrior, so he fits "to rule the stables, not the kingdom of Anga!" (5). Hearing the harsh words of Bhima, Karna gets hurt, and so he becomes silent. While Bhishma Pitamaha and the other elders remain silent, Duryodhana comes to rescue Karna. He reiterates that the "valour which defines a Kshatriyas but a Kshatriya does not define valour" (6). The skilful archery of Karna and

the generous act of Duryodhana make them great friends. Duryodhana's support soothes his injured heart to some extent.

### **Humiliated by Draupadi at her Swayamvara Ceremony**

Karna is once again put to severe humiliation by Draupadi at her swayamvara ceremony. Being invited by King Drupada, Karna, as the king of Anga, attends the swayamvara ceremony of the princess of Panchala kingdom. She announces that she would wed the best archer who could shoot with a bow and arrow into "the eye of a rotating wooden fish", but the archer should not look at the target directly but he should achieve the target in a single chance by "looking at its reflection in a bowl of water" (Kane 31). Karna gets ready to hit the target, but to his dismay, Draupadi loudly states that she does not wed a Suta though he is the king of Anga. Equality Labs study reveals, "[...] every child inherits their ancestor's caste, through the Hindu Varna system, which determines their social status and assigns them 'spiritual purity. This inherited status can determine where you live, what you eat and who you marry, and even where you can be buried or cremated when you die'" (The Ambedkarite Today, par. 1). It is this social perspective that has made Draupadi talk that she would not "wed a base-born man" (Kane 31). Wounded by the discriminatory and discourteous words of Draupadi, Karna withdraws from his attempt flinging the bow down and turns away, saying: "O sun! Be my witness that I cast aside the bow, not because I am unable to hit the mark, but because the princess mocks me" (31). This humiliating incident makes a massive impact on his psyche. Even after a long time since the occurrence of this humiliating incident, Karna cannot forget the scornful statement of Draupadi. Though this is not the first time Karna has undergone humiliating treatment by others, this keeps on stinging his heart, making him restless; this restlessness makes him commit a colossal error in the following years.

### **Kunti's Inability to Reveal the Real Identity of Karna**

One of the factors that cause psychological distress in Karna is the inability of Kunti, his biological mother, to reveal the secret of his birth. The leading cause for her inability lies in an incident in her life during her girlhood days. Immensely pleased with her revered services during his visit to the kingdom of Kuntibhoja, the sage Durvasa bestows on her with a boon of a divine mantra. Using this holy mantra, she can invoke any god she likes and begets children with Him if and when she needs. However, out of childish innocence, she wants to test the prowess of the divine mantra and chants it invoking the sun god. To her dismay, the sun god appears before her. She gets baffled, but the sun god assures her that she does not lose her virginity and thereby, Kunti gives birth to a child she abandons, having feared the social criticism as she has begotten the child before marriage. The abandoned child, brought up by the Suta family, becomes Karna. Later Kunti is married to King Pandu.

The other significant cause that makes Kunti embrace silence is that she begets three children using the same divine mantra at the behest of her husband, King Pandu, who is

restricted to not mate with any woman due to a curse. Kunti begets three children: Yudhishtira with the god Yama, Bhima with Vayu, and Arjuna with Indra. As Kunti teaches the same mantra to Madri, the second wife of Pandu, she too begets twins: Nakul and Sahadev with Aswini gods. This episode testifies the fact that polyandry was in vogue in India during the era of Mahabharata. Discussing the practice of polyandry in several countries in the world in his book *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Engels says, polyandry is still [by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century] in practice “among Nairs in India, where three or four men have a wife in common, each of them can have a second wife in common with another three or more men, and similarly a third and a fourth and so on” (Engels 33). It appears that the practice of polyandry with some specific features was in vogue during the era of Mahabharata and this social phenomenon is reflected through the characterisation of Kunti.

Begetting children with the other men is called the custom of “Niyoga”. According to this custom, a woman may mate with another man with her husband’s consent for begetting children. This practice of “Niyoga” custom is the evidence for a socially approved form of polyandry though not in vogue predominantly in the then society. At the same time, this custom was not entirely outdated by then. Were it a predominant custom in society during this period, King Pandu would not need to request and force his wife so intensely to beget children using the divine mantra. This fact is revealed through the conversation between Kunti and Uruvi. Kunti says that “all he wanted was an heir to the throne”, and so “he exhorted me, he appealed to me, he pleaded with me to use the mantra” (Kane 154-155).

When it comes to the revelation that Karna is her son, Kunti still hesitates because of another prevalent custom that a woman can have up to three husbands even under the “Niyoga” system. If she begets a child with a fourth man, she is considered a “whore”. Kunti herself talks about this custom to her husband, King Pandu when he asks her to beget more children under the “Niyoga” system. Under these critical social circumstances, she becomes silent, unable to announce that Karna is her son fathered by the sun god. If she reveals the fact, it is known to the world that she has got four children with four husbands, and this fact, she fears, would badly mar her reputation as a virtuous woman.

Because of the prevalent patriarchal domination in society, Kunti was unable to reveal the truth. Because the monogamous marriage system allowed men to be polygamous, but it did not allow women to be polyandrous. Engels says that “monogamous marriage comes on the scene as the subjugation of the one sex by the other; it announces a struggle between the sexes unknown throughout the previous prehistoric period” (Engels 35). It means it is with the advent of the monogamous marriage system that patriarchy was established in society. These unjustified prevalent customs asserted male superiority and female subordination. In turn, this female subordination became a cause for feelings of insecurity in women like Kunti under the monogamous marriage system. Because of this reason, Kunti gets frightened to reveal the truth. Karna, too, understands that his biological mother Kunti would never publicly tell the truth to protect herself from the eventual social criticism.

At the archery tournament in Hastinapur, Kunti identifies Karna “with golden armour and earrings” as her son whom she begot with the sun god before her marriage. Unable to witness the fierce rivalry between her sons –Karna and Arjuna– she faints, but she cannot reveal the truth that Karna is her son. She remains silent in all the contexts when Karna is subjected to humiliations. When Karna is questioned about his identity and subjected to humiliation by her son Bhima, she cannot announce that Karna is of royal birth because it is true that Karna was born to Kunti and the sun god, but he was born to an “unmarried princess”, and so he is an illegitimate son. This is the reason why Karna, in a context, says to Uruvi that he is “of blue blood and celestial lineage”, but he is “an illegitimate son flung away by [his] unmarried princess-mother and a celestial god” (Kane 235). In a state of despondency, he comments on his miserable low social status that he is “yet the Sutaputra, a Kshatriya yet not a Kshatriya!” (235).

### **Causes behind Kunti's Inability to Speak the Truth**

The leading cause for Karna's miserable low social identity lies in the complex marriage customs of that age. Predominantly, there were three forms of marriage in the prehistoric period. They are group marriages in the period of savagery, pairing marriages in barbarism and monogamous marriages in the civilised societies “with supplements of adultery and prostitution” (Engels). The Mahabharata story is believed to have taken place in the Iron Age, which extended from 1500 to 600 BCE. It is also believed that its story was not written in the immediate years following the Kurukshetra war. Subsequently, this story had been told and retold by people for generations and ages until it was written in the times of Gupta kings. Hence there is no unanimity among historians and scholars about the authentic historical period during which the Mahabharata story occurred. But there is much evidence that asserts that the level of this epic was set in the Iron Age. The Iron Age is a civilised age in which the practice of monogamous marriages was prevalent. Engels says that “the practice of monogamous marriages was preceded by pairing marriage system” according to which a man possesses several wives out of whom a woman was his “chief wife”, and similarly the man would be her “important” husband out of her other husbands (25). He says, “a certain amount of pairing, for a longer or shorter period, already occurred in group marriage or even earlier; the man had a chief wife among his many wives, and for her, he was the most important among her husbands” (25). Their progeny was recognised according to their “mother line”. These pairing marriages were not predominant during the age of the Mahabharata as this system was gradually getting replaced or almost replaced by a monogamous marriage system in this age which, according to Lord Krishna, is “the age of transition”.

There are several instances in the Mahabharata for the practice of polyandry sporadically by people even while the monogamous marriage system was prevalent. Engels opines that “the monogamous marriage system was “developed out of pairing marriage system” (33) under which a man can have several wives whereas a woman was restricted to have one husband. This sowed seeds to establish the “supremacy of the man” (33) in society. Another important characteristic feature of the monogamous marriage system, in the opi-

nion of Engels, is that when a man has several relationships with his woman slaves, their progeny was considered his children who were entitled to inherit only a small portion of his property but not an equal share of it as same as the children of his legitimate wife or wives. The character of Vidhura is an example of this socio, economic and cultural phenomenon of the era. Though Vidhura, along with his brothers Dhritarashtra and Pandu, was born to the same father, he was denied kingdom based on his 'low birth' as he was born to a maid in the court of Hastinapur. Hence, he was not as legitimate a son as Dhritarashtra and Pandu, though he is physically and mentally better than the other two. Similarly, Karna is an illegitimate son of Kunti who gave birth to him before her marriage with King Pandu.

### **Karna's Low Self-esteem and Search for His True Self**

It is because of these existing socio-cultural relations that cruelly made Karna undergo humiliations in various contexts. Because of these humiliations, he develops an inferiority complex. Consequently, he suspects the swayamavara invitation from the Pukeya kingdom as another ploy. Even after his marriage with Uruvi, who has wedded him plunging all the invited in surprise at her swayamvara ceremony, Karna fails to understand the true love of Uruvi. He asks Uruvi why she has married him and whether it is a game or a gambit. "Is this a game?" he rasped, a frown marring his handsome features. A new ploy? Or were you forced into this marriage?" (Kane 40). This episode exemplifies the psychological trauma usually caused by socio-economic inequalities manifest in an individual in various weaknesses. Karna's low self-esteem in this context is one such example.

Karna's main concern is that he, being an excellent archer, is not accepted by the Pandavas, though he is made the king of Anga. He says that "the Pandavas have never accepted [him]" (Kane 103). It was a major tendency in India's caste-ridden ancient and medieval societies that the then rulers and religious authorities did not duly recognise the knowledge, skill and innovations of the lower castes. There was a misconception in those societies that the ideas of a 'low-born' would be as low as his lower social status, and consequently, the skill and talent of a person like Karna were blindly ignored. This social disorder prevalent in society during the era of Mahabharata is reflected in this novel through the characterisation of Karna. This unjustifiable and inhuman social discrimination in society causes severe mental turmoil in the victims. Karna is not an exception for it.

Consequently, Karna is consistently found to be a disturbing personality who is desperately searching for his "true self". It is known to us through the thoughts of his wife, Uruvi: "Would it make any difference? Uruvi shrugged her shoulders. In spite of having us, his children and a family that loves him unconditionally, Karna is so remote. I always thought a family was a refuge in a merciless world but does it hold true for Karna? He is always so alone, ever unfulfilled, constantly haunted by the unresolved ambiguity of his true self" (Kane 173-174).

Karna's injured psyche maddens and makes him wage wars indiscriminately to expand the empire of his friend Duryodhana. Having been angry with Karna, who had humiliated

Draupadi in the court of Hastinapur, Uruvi leaves him and goes to her father's home. Karna apologises for his unpardonable error. However, much he requests Uruvi to pardon him, she does not change her mind. As a consequence of her uncompromised attitude, Karna leaves his family and entirely engages himself in the military activities of his friend Duryodhana. Karna devotes himself entirely to the aim of Duryodhana, who wishes to expand his empire. He wages war after war and wins all the battles, and expands the kingdom of his friend. This episode is an example that asserts the dialectical relationship between the society and the psyche of an individual who lives in it. While the discriminatory social relations cause disturbed psyche in individuals, the individuals, under some circumstances, cause social turmoil in society. Karna's troubled psyche makes him firmly determined to prove himself as a warrior who is more competent than Arjuna. In order to achieve this, Karna never hesitates to battle with anyone, causing bloodshed for the expansion of Duryodhana's kingdom. Karna thinks that he can gain social acceptance by winning the fight with Arjuna, and so he says to Uruvi that he "cannot die till he battles Arjuna" (Kane 223).

### **Causes behind His Psychological Distress**

The causes for the psychological problems of an individual, according to the Freudian theory, are to be found in the unconscious mind, which "is a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that outside of [his or her] conscious awareness" (Cherry, par. 8). Contrary to the Freudian theory, the dialectical and historical materialistic understanding asserts that the material conditions of social life impact the human psyche. This means the causes for the disturbed psyche of the characters in literature, which is usually the creative reflection of society with a confluence of fiction, should be searched for in the then-existing socio-economic order of the society. Because the production system is the base on which the superstructure, which consists of politics, judiciary, culture, religious practices and the other aspects, is established. There is a dialectical relationship between human society and the human psyche. While discriminatory social and economic conditions cause disturbed minds in individuals, some individuals with troubled psyches cause social turmoil in society.

For this, the best example is Karna, who, in a vengeful mood, encourages Duryodhana to strip off Draupadi in the court of Hastinapur in front of all the present. Cohen believes that "criminal behaviour is caused by undue strain (frustration) experienced as a result of pathological social structures" (cited from Day & Marion, 2017: 249). In this context, Karna, the man of integrity, becomes an ordinary weak-minded man. The massive insult Draupadi put to him at her swayamvara ceremony maddens him, and that humiliation makes him forget, at that moment, all his ingrained noble values. However, Karna realises his blunder and feels like stopping the heinous episode but in vain. Later, when questioned by his wife Uruvi, Karna collapses on his knees and burst into tears, recollecting the episode of humiliation to which Draupadi was put in the court of Hastinapur. Karna confesses his guilt before his wife, Uruvi: "I will not defend myself, for what I've done is disgraceful. Yes, I've been a brute and a beast and done the lowliest thing possible. I hate myself for what I did. And I know it's been terrible for you. It was endless madness!" (Kane 117).

Having been guilty of such a heinous crime, Karna feels that his entire body is being burnt in the fire. He unconditionally apologises to Uruvi for his uncouth behaviour. However, Uruvi leaves him in a fury for her father's home. This unsympathetic act of his wife causes profound misery in him, and this frame of mind, in turn, makes him choose to spend his days expanding the kingdom of Hastinapur by waging and winning wars for his friend Duryodhana.

Lord Krishna's revelation of the secret of his birth causes psychological conflict in his mind. In this context, he gets annoyed and cannot agree with Lord Krishna, who has told him about the mystery of his birth and offered him the throne of Hastinapur on a condition that he (Karna) agrees to fight the war on behalf of Pandavas. Karna finds fault with Lord Krishna as he has revealed the secret of his birth just before the beginning of the battle of Kurukshetra. Because his disclosure of the truth, Karna says to Krishna, would evoke affectionate feelings in him for his biological brothers, Pandavas, and consequently, he could not fight them on the battlefield unhesitatingly. However, Lord Krishna further tries to persuade Karna, saying, "according to dharma, you are the eldest Pandava, the first-born child of Kunti [...]. Come and join me. Be with your brothers and mother. I shall give you the kingdom that you deserve"; and then Krishna added, "Draupadi can be your wife too" (Kane 236). In fact, Lord Krishna's revelation of the truth intensifies his psychological trauma.

Karna is sure about his eventual death, yet he sides with Duryodhana only because Duryodhana had sided with him when he was wading through the troubled waters of an identity crisis at the archery tournament in Hastinapur. This is the reason why, though he knows about his eventual death, he decides to die fighting on behalf of his friend. In one of the contexts in the novel, Karna unlocks his bruised heart before Uruvi, Karna saying that he was refused to be taught by Guru Dronacharya and cursed by Guru Parashurama, who mistakenly assumed that he (Karna) deliberately concealed his Kshatriya identity; he was insulted by Bhima and "scorned" by Arjuna at the archery tournament. The only reason for all these humiliations he was subjected to is that his so-called low-caste birth.

Karna's long-cherished aspiration for due recognition and "dignity and honour [he] deserves" is not materialised (Kane 233). However, to some extent, the vacuum in his heart is filled by his friendship with Duryodhana. This is why Karna believes that he owes to Duryodhana besides his adoptive mother Radha, so he bows his head before Duryodhana for his selfless friendship. In this context, Karna also clarifies that he is not indebted to Duryodhana for crowning him the King of Anga because he has never aspired to become a king, but he is obligated to Duryodhana who has saved him from social ostracism. This conversation between Karna and Krishna reveals the noble quality of "gratitude" in Karna. Subsequently, though Krishna reveals the truth about his birth parents, Karna reasserts that he would continue to be with his adoptive mother Radha and his friend Duryodhana. This episode reasserts the fact that an individual, at least to some extent, may accept to lead a

life in poverty or with low economic status, but he can never accept the subhuman social status in the society he lives in. This intense desire remains the same in the individuals who have been subject to social ostracism regardless of the historical era. This social reality is reflected in this retelling novel of the epic Mahabharata through the characterisation of Karna.

### **Relevance of the Novel in Contemporary Times**

Commenting on the significance and relevance of her novel, Kavita Kane reveals in one of her interviews that she wanted to bring to the light the unknown facts about the unsung hero, Karna. She says, during her interview with *India book store*, “Karna though revered and unanimously popular, remains quite a mystery, and his private life is entirely not known. He is seen either as Arjuna’s rival or Duryodhan’s friend, the tragic hero who is doomed and damned” (An Interview with Kavita, par. 3). Though mythology is an exaggerated version of the incidents in the prehistoric age, their relevance is not entirely lost. More importantly, the Mahabharata has retained its significance even in the modern era due to its various unique features and the brief discourse on the caste system, among several features. With this understanding, Kane comments in another interview with R. Krithika that “Mythology [...] has been used as a literary device to portray contemporary issues and sensibilities” (par. 1).

Karna, the much loved and revered character, endeared himself, with much more intensity, to the readers in the new millennium by this novel. Karna, an epitome of all virtues, has been subject to social discrimination and humiliation since his formative years. He is refused to be trained at archery by Guru Dronacharya, objected by Guru Kripacharya, prevented from participating in the archery tournament, and slandered as *Sutaputra* by Bhīma and rejected harshly by Draupadi at her swayamvara.

Being the king of Anga, Karna gives alms just like the other kings, Yudhister and Duryodhana, to the needy. However, he is denied of being recognised as a Kshatriya. He wins all the battles he waged and expands the kingdom of Hastinapur. Nevertheless, he fails to achieve recognition on par with Arjuna because he is a mere Suta while Arjuna a Kshatriya. The deprivation of justifiable credit and the humiliations he is subjected to in various contexts in his life makes him a flawed man who commits errors. At the same time, being a conscience-driven man, he is the first person who realises his mistake and expresses his repentance before his wife, Uruvi. Karna, who knows that his death is inevitable as Arjuna and the other Pandavas are under the protection of Lord Krishna, chooses to die, fighting on behalf of his friend Duryodhana, who helped him gain self-respect, in the battle of Kurukshetra. The inhuman social discriminations which appear in *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Wife*, the retelling of the Mahabharata, are still in existence with changed forms even in today’s democratic societies, especially in India, the caste-ridden society. Today’s horrendous killings of the socially marginalised persons who have crossed the socially drawn lines (though constitutionally prohibited) reveal the truth that the story of

'Karna' –an epitome of the virtuousness but defeated by the then existing dominant social institutions and customs– is unending.

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