

## Analysis of the Roles and Representations of Wives in 'Ayodhya' and 'Hastinapur': A Cultural and Literary Exploration

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**Abstract.** Indian mythology is not just a collection of stories but a cultural heritage that embodies the collective wisdom of generations. The vision of world peace and harmony is deeply ingrained in Indian mythology. Its tales often revolve around the triumph of 'Dharma' over 'Adharma' and the restoration of balance and order. The re-interpretation of ancient texts through the lens of modern sensibilities serves as a bridge between the past and the present. This article delves into the mythological works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane and throws light on their way of representing of these mythological figures. For this study, I have chosen Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, *The Forest of Enchantments* and Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* and *Sita's Sister*. This paper focuses on the lives of these mythical women as Draupadi, Sita, Uruvi and Urmila.

**Keywords :** Mythology; world peace; harmony; heritage; dharma; adharma.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane are prominent authors who have enriched contemporary literature with their mythological novels, offering readers a fresh perspective of ancient Indian epics and myths. Their works are celebrated for weaving together the rich tapestry of Indian culture, tradition and history. They also highlight the timeless values and lessons embedded within these stories.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels often explore themes of love, duty, sacrifice, and the quest for self-realisation. Her acclaimed works *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), and *The Forest Of Enchantments* (2019) retell the two great mythological Hindu epics with perspectives of Draupadi and Sita. Divakaruni does not merely restructure the narratives of the epics; instead, she reimagines and revitalizes the stories of the two iconic women from mythology. She gives them a powerful self-assured

voice, sharing their tales amidst the grand scale of two major wars fought by men, where women are depicted as mere tools in the male-dominated pursuit of power.

In her most renowned work *The Palace of Illusions* Divakaruni portrays Panchali as a bold yet headstrong character but also a victim of colourism as she says “In a society that looked down its patrician nose on anything except milk and almond hues, this was considered most unfortunate, especially for a girl” (*The Palace of Illusions*, 8). In her book, *Revisioning Indian Mythology* Monica Khanna Jhalani highlights how patriarchy utilized mythology to propagate the ideologically constructed identity of women in Indian society. Divakaruni portrays Panchali as phenomenal yet relatable who fights against the patriarchal system throughout her journey. She is an intelligent woman who points out how Dhri’s life was directed by his father for an act of age-old revenge that King Drupad sought through him. He was living a life like a machine and was unemotional, “Aren’t you giving up your entire life to get King Drupad what he wants senseless though it is ?” (19).

Divakaruni’s portrayal of Draupadi points out the harsh reality of our lives as men too are subject to social pressure with or without realizing it. Draupadi also rejects the notion of polygamy in a society where multiple marriages are familiar. She points it out jovially, “My husband won’t take up another wife- I’ll make him promise that before I marry him” (30). Her search for identity in the swayamvar establishes a revolutionary paradigm, shedding light on the suppressed desires of women within the patriarchal framework. Draupadi’s fascination with Karna’s portrait leaves an indelible mark on her heart, igniting a profound sense of love that lingers within her forever. Every aspect of Karna’s story grips Draupadi’s flesh and soul, akin to silent suffering yearning for his happiness. As she asserts “Absurdly I wanted to be the reason of his smile”(69). Draupadi’s hidden longing for Karna unveils the suppressed voice of women, crucially highlighting the echoes of feminine desires silenced by societal norms of honour and family obligations. Draupadi is such a strong woman that she played a pivotal role in establishing the kingdom of the Pandavas. She proved her worth, as a result of which even if her husbands had other wives she remained special to them throughout her life, “I’d played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny.... If they were pearls, I was the gold wire on which they were strung”(151).

In her work *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni skillfully presents Sita not as a prototypical dignified idol woman or a muted sufferer, but as a woman of undeniable strength, capturing the various facets of femininity with her character. Sita is not merely a character, she embodies a potent symbol of liberation and courage. Therefore, Divakaruni empowers Sita by providing her perspective through her retelling of *the Ramayana*, “write our story too. For always we’ve been pushed into corners, trivialised, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten or maligned and used as cautionary tales” (*The Forest of Enchantments*, 4). Through her journey of self-discovery, she reshapes her once pliable identity into an emblem of empowerment exploring the essence of womanhood in a new light. Empowered by a ‘quil’ and the art of ‘questioning’, the author equips Sita with formidable tools to confront patriarchal norms. Divakaruni preserves the essence of Sita, highlighting her remarkable resilience and capacity to withstand profound suffering. However, in this text, endurance is portrayed not as a sign of weakness but as a testament to strength. During her exile, Sita dreamt of Sunaina, Ahalya, Mandodari, Sarma, Kaikeyi, Tara and even Surpanakha and they advised her to preserve them. They say endure, just as we are encouraged to do, “Endure your challenges” (322). Therefore, the narrative promotes a fresh perspective on empowerment via endurance. It also inspires women to confront hurdles and emerge victorious. While going for exile, Ram objects to her capability as a woman and she counters his belief by saying, “Not all women are weak and helpless like you think. For all you know, I might be of help to you” (111). Divakaruni’s Sita is a symbol of nature as she claims, “My strange gift with plants was a mystery to me. Perhaps it was because, like them, I was earth-born, Maybe for some reason, when I touched a plant, I knew it’s healing properties” (7). After the birth of Lav- Kush Ram orders Sita to come back to the kingdom of Ayodhya but instructs her to undergo the trial by fire to demonstrate her innocence and purity. Sita refuses to endure such humiliation, as she argues, “Because If I do what you demand, society will use my action forever after to judge other women. Even when they aren’t guilty, the burden of proving their innocence will fall on them. And society will say, why not? Even Queen Sita went through it” (356-357). Volga has commented on Divakaruni’s Sita as “Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s Sita ... is an epitome of courage and self-respect, showing a path for all woman. While weaving a familiar story, Chitra provides deep and surprising insights” (Volga, Chitradivakaruni.com). Sita’s quest for solace in Mother Earth as her

ultimate sanctuary unveils her rage at the ongoing betrayals she endured throughout her life. Nabaneeta Dev Sen comments on it, “Sita’s suicide is akin to women who choose to end their lives as a result of physical violence” (Sen, 24-25). Sita’s final act of defiance against subjugation undoubtedly empowers her and future women who must courageously confront such mistreatment. Recognising the need for self-actualisation, Sita chooses to assert her autonomy, rejecting others’ control over her life. Moreover, in this ultimate display of bravery and strength, Sita shatters the portrayal of her as weak and submissive, as depicted in the Vedic literature for centuries.

Both Draupadi and Sita speak with intense emotion, sharing their experiences of happiness, sadness, longing, love, motherhood, being wives, enduring loss and exile, and suffering at the hands of men. These novels illustrate how women are compelled to accept the traditional cultural norms without questioning them. Divakaruni’s interpretation adds a human touch to the epic, making it feel more real, easier to connect with, and, more intimate.

Kavita Kane, an Indian author renowned for her mythology fiction, is celebrated for her feminist perspective on Indian mythology. Her writing sheds light on often overlooked female characters of Indian mythology. Her novels are consistently centred around women, offering distinctive and empowering portrayals of these characters. In an interview with *The Hindu*, Kane emphasized the significance of mythology:

If myths reflect the socio-cultural ethos of earlier times, they can also be used to contemporaries those same issues in today’s world. Nothing has changed. Love, rivalry, disappointment, war, anger, greed, all these emotions still exist. There’s a chance for an alternative perspective by looking at the epics through the women and minor characters. (*The Hindu*)

Kane specializes in bringing to the fore, the lesser-known women of Indian mythology, thereby giving voice to characters who have been sidelined in traditional narratives. Her novels such as *Karna’s Wife: The Outcast Queen* and *Sita’s Sister*, explore the lives and struggles of characters like

Uruvi and Urmila, respectively. Kane portrays Uruvi as a beauty with a brain. Uruvi, the princess of Pukeya, defies societal norms by following both her heart and mind in her decision-making process. She goes beyond societal expectations by marrying Karna, a man from a lower caste, driven solely by her unconditional love for him. Kane introduces Uruvi as, "The spirited daughter who had inherited her mother's glorious beauty and her father's sharp mind and both sizzled her short flashes of temper" (*Karna's Wife* 9). Despite being born with a silver spoon, she exudes a spark in her character. Initially, she is considered unconventional but vibrant, a girl with a scientific temper. Kane says, "While a girl of her age was groomed to become dainty princesses, Uruvi saddled her horse each morning to ride to the gurukul where she spent the day immersed in the worth of medicinal herbs and other remedies" (16). Her father sees her as a strong opponent of war as he states, "there were moments she hated being a Kshatriya princess too" (16). The novel's narrative revolves around Uruvi's inner reflections and contemplations, delving into her profound love for Karna and how he became the wellspring of joy and inspiration in her life. Through Uruvi's perspective, we are granted access to Karna's life, his quest for identity, aspirations, and innermost thoughts as they unfold before us. Initially presented to us adorned in divine attire, she swiftly transforms into a character of flesh and blood; she confesses that Vrushali and Draupadi are such ladies who do invoke a sense of worthlessness in her heart. Uruvi expresses her love for Karna to her father, "you told me to look into the mirror each morning and be proud of myself, to do nothing that I would be ashamed of. I am not ashamed to have fallen in love with Karna" (21). She convinces her father to marry Karna and also asserts that Karna is not a wrong man but a wrong man. She says, "A good man trapped in a bad situation" (18). After her marriage with Karna, she confronts the social segregation imposed by her relatives with the resilience of a lioness. Although Uruvi's love for Karna is wholehearted yet not blind, that leads her to leave Karna when he abuses Draupadi in the Royal court. Frowned at Karna for insulting a woman, she compelled him to acknowledge his wrongdoing by stating "It was n't Draupadi whom Dushashana was stripping but you!... not Draupadi" (119). Kane throws a spotlight on the marginalized characters of the Mahabharata e.g. the pent-up desires, grief and agony of Ashwatthama, Bhishma, Draupadi, Duryodhana and Kunti. Uruvi's conversations unveil their concealed emotions. Sometimes, the character's expressions in the novel reflect the doubts and dilemmas that readers often experience while reading the

novel. For example, the characters of Ashwatthama and Duryodhana are depicted as Machiavellian and Byronic heroes with negative traits because of their unfulfilled desires, "While Duryodhana was doomed before he was born... he was born as a child of hatred and lives to hate..."(87). At the swyamvar, Uruvi has changed how things are usually done. Instead of following the traditional way where the heroine chooses a prince or nobleman, she chooses Karna who is a Sutputra and is not of royal birth. This goes against the norm, unlike Draupadi who didn't choose Karna because of his lower status and said, "I will not allow a low-born sutputra to participate in the challenge. Please do not proceed"(31). The final lines of the novel reach its climax, delivering a powerful message of forgiveness as the key to prosperity, "It was leaving hell and touching heaven. It was divinity"(305). While drawing from the saga of Karna in the Mahabharata, it challenges Vyasa's narrative and reconstructs a subaltern's story through contemporary theoretical perspectives.

Her other best-selling novel *Sita's Sister* deals with the journey of Urmila. Urmila, the rightful daughter of King Janak and princess of Mithila, has been unjustly denied not only her birthright but also her right place in the epic tale. In Valmiki's Ramayana Urmila's character is merely portrayed as Lakshman's neglected wife, and her sacrifices are disregarded, reducing her to merely sleeping for fourteen years while Lakshman was in exile with Ram and Sita. But, Kane's narrative beautifully revolves around Urmila, portraying her as a sister new bride, a responsible wife and a discerning critic, capturing her range of emotions and roles with depth and nuance. Urmila as Kane portrays is both learned and loving, sensible yet strong, possessing a hot-headed nature tempered by maturity. When Lakshman decides to accompany Ram and Sita during their exile, Urmila intentionally lashes out at him with hurtful words, "You cannot stay back for me because your brother is more precious than your wife. You are not like your father to listen to his wife, are you?"(*Sita's Sister*, 147); When Lakshman departs, she believes by intentionally causing him pain, she makes it easier for him to harbor feelings of resentment towards her rather than enduring the pain of love during their fourteen years of separation. Urmila's vocal opposition to Bharat's decision to spend the next fourteen years in Nandigram exemplifies her confident and courageous spirit. She questions his adherence to dharma about his wife Mandavi, "We have talked about all sorts of Dharma- of the father and the sons, of the kings and princess, of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya -

even if the wife for her husband. But is there no dharma of the husband for his wife?" (219). At Chitrakoot, Urmila valiantly stands up for Mandavi's sake. She boldly confronts the sages and scholars, challenging her husband and brothers' obligations towards the women in their family. Urmila openly criticises Ram for allowing Sita to be questioned about her chastity after her rescue from Lanka. Kane has masterfully crafted a vivid portrayal of Urmila's life over the fourteen years, depicting her as an unparalleled heroine who endures immense pain and anguish solely to serve her husband. Kane says, "Interpret the sleep as a metaphor for loneliness and loss" (The Hindu).

In this way, both Divakaruni and Kane deeply value the rich heritage and moral complexities embedded in Indian mythology. Traditionally, Indian mythology has been a vehicle for imparting ethical and philosophical lessons. By re-imagining these stories, Divakaruni and Kavita Kane not only preserve these lessons but also prompt readers to reflect on their application in today's context. Their novels are a testament to the enduring legacy of these ancient stories, illustrating how they continue to offer guidance and inspiration in the modern world. The authors emphasise the inner lives and emotional journeys of their characters, and also bring a human dimension to these mythological figures, making them relatable to contemporary readers. Their narratives encourage a revolution of values such as justice, loyalty, and the role of women in society, showcasing how these ancient tales can serve as a mirror of our times. Through their mythological novels, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane connect the past and the present, showcasing the enduring relevance of human emotions and societal struggles. By focusing on the stories of powerful yet relatable characters, they highlight the enduring relevance of Indian mythology, showcasing its potential to inspire and teach. Their works are the celebration of Indian culture and traditions, inviting readers to explore the depth and richness of these ancient narratives while reflecting on the values they embody.

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