

## Shifting Focalisation in *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*

SNEHA KULKARNI

**Abstract.** The character-driven narratives have expanded the realm of traditional narratives found in ancient epics. Karna's wife, as depicted in Kavita Kané's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, is an example of this invention. This paper explores Uruvi's character and her perspective in the modern retelling of the Mahabharata. While Vrushali is Karna's wife, Uruvi emerges as a new character, imagined by the writer, when she is introduced as his wife. Through an analysis of retellings such as *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, this study examines changes in the focalization of the story. This paper also highlights the effect of character-driven narratives, 'Uruvi', on the interpretation of the epic. It examines the narrative strategy (focalisation) used to convey Karna's point of view through the character of Uruvi by shedding light on the narrative mechanics of character introduction and development. This paper argues that Uruvi's story is an excellent example of how modern writers shape the perspective of contemporary audiences through these retellings while re-examining the epic.

**Keywords :** Focalisation, re-interpretation, retellings, perspective, narratives.

*The Mahabharata* is one of the most complex epic literature around the globe. It is an amalgamation of varied narratives and characters whose choices and actions shape philosophical and moral teachings. Every character, may it be a hero or villain, human or divine, played a crucial role in the epic's exploration of *dharma*, *karma*, fate, and duty. The epic *The Mahabharata* has been used as a source for numerous retellings and adaptations over the centuries. However, writers by introducing entirely new characters, particularly ones not present in the original epic, have brought an intriguing shift in narrative perspective that can change the way audiences perceive the story.

One such imaginary character is Uruvi, who is introduced in contemporary retelling as the wife of Karna. Unlike Vrushali (Karna's wife), Uruvi does not have a historical precedent in the traditional text.

Her introduction in the novel Kavita Kané's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* shows a significant narrative shift. Uruvi is not merely an addition to Karna's personal story but also acts as a medium for reframing his character and decisions. Uruvi's creation and integration into the story introduce new meanings. Kavita Kané's choice to add a character who did not exist in the original text not only shifts the focus of the story (the new narrative is viewed from an entirely new vantage point) but the reader's understanding of the character of Karna, his struggles, and his relationships is also now filtered through Uruvi's perspective. Uruvi here acts as a narrative device that influences the reader's interpretation of key events and provides a subjective context of the entire epic.

Thus, Kané's Uruvi is not merely in a supporting role but has been presented as a protagonist who effectively reshapes the narrative lens through which Karna's character is examined. It should be noted that the narrative structure of the story is also altered, as a new voice and viewpoint not only modulates the original attributes of characters but also reconfigures the moral and emotional scope of the epic.

This paper argues that the introduction of Uruvi demonstrates that the addition of a new character and its point of view can influence the broader narrative perspective, as in *Karna's Wife*, as Uruvi's point of view forces readers to reconsider the role of Karna in *The Mahabharata*. By analysing Uruvi's character and her narrative function, the paper explores how her presence readjusts the focalisation of the story and the impact of this shift on the reader's understanding of Karna's journey. This study underscores the power of narrative innovation and shows the transformation of an ancient epic by creating new perspectives. The paper explores the alteration in Karna's story by focusing on the effect of a character's perspective on narrative focalisation.

### **The Role of Focalisation in Shaping the Perspective of a Story**

Narratology explores the narrative structure of a story and the effect of elements such as plot, characters, and point of view, on the understanding of the reader. It also examines the effect of these narratives and narrative structures on our perception. Focalisation, coined by Gérard Genette, is a key concept in narrative theory, which refers to the perspective through which a story's events are seen or experienced. This can be either the narrator's perspective or a specific character's internal perspective. The focaliser determines what information should be available to the reader

and how it will be framed, which directly influences the reader's interpretation of the characters, events, and themes.

There are numerous characters and plotlines in epics like *the Mahabharata* therefore, the focus shifts frequently in order to have a broader view of events or to understand a particular character's inner life. The focus (focalisation) of a story can affect the readers' involvement with the text, as it leads to different interpretations depending on the perspective they are experiencing.

Focalisation plays an important role in shaping readers' perceptions and the narrative depth of the story. As Gérard Genette discussed in *Narrative Discourse* (1980), "focalisation determines who sees and who tells a story" (57). This influences how characters and events are interpreted. The authors can control how much information is accessible to the reader, through zero (omniscient), internal (limited), and external (detached) focalisation, thereby moulding empathy and skewing thematic interpretation. Mikhail Bakhtin explains in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), "texts are constructed in multiple voices and perspectives to create a dialogic space where different points of view interact" (91). The Mahabharata is a great example in this context, as by shifting viewpoints, it ensures that the readers engage with different perspectives rather than a singular emotional experience. Thus, the reader can evaluate Karna independently without being influenced by a single character's emotions or biases.

Suzanne Keen, in *Empathy and the Novel* (2007) argues, "internal focalisation increases reader empathy by immersing them in a single character's emotional world". (61) It is evident that while internal focalisation can make a story more relatable and engaging, it also reduces interpretive freedom if employed alone, especially in a retelling of an epic, as readers are compelled to see other characters only through the perspective of the focaliser.

### **Focalisation in *The Mahabharata***

There is zero, internal, as well as external focalisation in the Mahabharata, which makes it one of the most layered narrative structures in world literature. Readers engage with multiple perspectives through an omniscient narrator (zero focalisation), therefore understanding characters like Karna, Arjuna, Draupadi, and Krishna through various viewpoints.

This broad, all-knowing perspective enables a multifaceted exploration of dharma, fate, and morality and enables readers to explore the epic's multifaceted view without being restricted to a singular interpretation. However, there are moments of internal focalization, particularly in emotionally intense scenes. For example, Draupadi's humiliation in the court of Kauravas and Bhishma's internal conflict on the battlefield. In these scenes, internal focalisation navigates through the character's perspective and creates empathy and a deep emotional connection with the readers.

The narration of the Kurukshetra battle and large-scale events, in contrast, often relies on external focalisation. Here, the narration is detached from internal thoughts and focuses on physical actions and grand descriptions rather than psychological depth. This creates a sense of realism and objectivity by distancing the reader from personal bias.

### **Narrative Impact of Uruvi's Perspective**

Gérard Genette's theory of focalisation provides a critical framework for analysing *Karna's Wife : The Outcast's Queen* by Kavita Kané. In *The Mahabharata*, the narrative employs zero focalisation, presenting events through an omniscient perspective and the readers perceive Karna through multiple viewpoints, such as viewpoints of his allies, enemies, Krishna, and other key figures. This multi-dimensional perspective in *The Mahabharata* provides a deep understanding of Karna's dilemmas, loyalty, and tragic downfall. However, Kané's retelling differs by employing internal focalisation to limit the story to Uruvi's perception. While this enhances the attachment of readers to Karna's story, it also limits their sight to a single emotionally driven reading and not a balanced or nuanced reading :

'No. Karna doesn't ever talk about what bothers him; he prefers bottling it all up!' Vrushali shook her head sadly. 'I cannot believe he is the same man whom I married so many years ago!

He seems to have changed so much. Whether it's a sign of corruption or maturity is something I fail to understand.'

Vrushali paused for an instant, fingering the *mangalsutra* hanging around her slender neck. 'Radheya has only one measure of right and wrong—his blind loyalty to Duryodhana in any situation. Even when he is wrong, Radheya supports him— that's all that matters to him, fully realizing that it will be his downfall one day. Truth and lies, right and wrong are all a matter of perception. Radheya believes he is right in standing up for his friend; we think he is wrong and his devotion is misplaced because it is for a man who has no integrity. He believes what happened at the Kuru hall was wrong, but he eventually ended up being part of it and now he berates himself silently,' she sighed. (171)

These lines highlight Uruvi's limited internal focalisation that shapes Karna's character through her emotions rather than his independent choices. Unlike *The Mahabharata*, where Karna's loyalty to Duryodhana is analysed from multiple perspectives, here, the reader is forced to see Karna's actions as Uruvi perceives them, i.e. as tragic and misguided rather than honourable.

By centring Uruvi's voice, the novel reframes Karna's identity through the lens of his relationships rather than his larger philosophical and moral conflicts. It romanticises his character, and reduces it to his role as a husband rather than a warrior caught in ethical dilemmas and internal conflicts.

Uruvi defines Karna's identity for the reader. She prioritises his emotions and feelings over his warrior's code. Whereas, in the original text, his dilemmas are depicted through multiple focalised perspectives i.e., from the perspective of Kunti, Krishna, Duryodhana, Arjuna and others.

Moreover, excluding multiple perspectives diminishes the greater socio-political and dharmic struggles that define Karna's choices and decisions, and subsequently weakens the epic's moral and ideological teachings.

In *The Mahabharata*, Kunti's request for Karna's allegiance before the war is portrayed as a moral dilemma because she is torn between maternal love and loyalty to the Pandavas :

Uruvi kept quiet, trying to contain her anger. This woman was now disclosing the truth she had hidden from the world and her son for only one reason—to save her other five sons. She did not want war as she was afraid Karna would vanquish and even kill them. Yet, she would not reveal to the world that Karna was her first-born child—merely to preserve her own reputation. She would rather watch her son battle it out with the Pandavas, a mother so selfish that she had let her son suffer ignominy rather than tarnish her image as the noble queen of King Pandu. (Kane, 255)

However, internal focalisation by Uruvi in the above lines presents Kunti as self-centred and manipulative by stripping her of her story of struggle and hardship. This bias taints the reader's impression of Kunti and presents her as a mother who abandoned her son (Karna) rather than a woman who was presented with a difficult moral decision.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) states, “stories should possess multiple viewpoints to support ideological richness, and this quote shows how limiting the story to Uruvi diminishes other characters' moral richness” (45) Additionally, emotional depth in Uruvi's perspective risks dominating Karna's agency because his struggles are predominantly perceived through Uruvi's pain and lust and not through his internal convictions :

He had instead distracted himself in his military campaigns. He had not dared to hope she would come back to him ever again. But she had, mercifully, although with a condition; a condition more cruel than the torture of living in the hellish void of her absence. He had mutely complied, consoled himself with the thought that she was close to him; that he could love her by simply looking at

her and live by keeping her by his side.  
 Karna hoped that they would be together  
 for as long as possible—but he knew  
 there was not much time. (*Karna's Wife:  
 The Outcast's Queen*, 192-93)

Through these lines, it can be understood that Karna's struggles are personalized through internal focalisation, by making it about love and pain rather than dharma and fate. In *the Mahabharata*, Karna's tragic fate is tied to cosmic justice and God's will such that he doesn't 'choose to suffer,' but he accepts it as his dharma. Whereas in *Karna's Wife*, Uruvi's emotions dominate what is known about his decision.

Roland Barthes (1974) states, "narrative structure influences meaning" (37), and the above-quoted lines support that focalisation reframes Karna's identity by moving him from an epic figure to a romanticised character.

While this feminised reinterpretation is innovative, it risks imposing contemporary emotional constructs onto a character whose beliefs were deeply rooted in duty and fate and would thus create a representation that is not wholly consistent with the philosophical content of the *Mahabharata*.

Therefore, while Kané's move from zero to internal focalisation provides a different perspective, it also imposes limitations by constricting the scope of the narrative by altering character agency, and emphasising more on personal emotion and less on greater philosophical and existential conflicts. This characteristic of the built-in substitution of a single, characterdriven perspective in the modern retellings of the epic gives depth in one area and generates a lack of thematic richness and ideological diversity.

### **Limitations of Character-Driven Retellings**

Narratives derived from epics like *the Mahabharata* must balance multiple voices, but retellings that only focus on a single character's viewpoint risk reducing the ideological diversity of the original text. Character-driven retellings while presenting new perspectives also risk narrative integrity and originality.

For example, in *Karna's Wife*, Uruvi's narrow perspective limits

the ethical and philosophical dimensions of Karna's character, making him more of an object of love than a great tragic hero who was a puppet in the hands of destiny. While these developments can deepen emotional engagement, they also simplify the morality and dilemmas central to his story. Thus, it can be said that even though character-driven storytelling enhances accessibility, it also risks changing round characters into one-dimensional flat characters.

Modern adaptations like *Karna's Wife*, often impose contemporary emotions and sensibilities onto classical characters, but distort their ideological depth. For instance, Uruvi's emotional focus diminishes Karna's agency, making him seem more reactive than proactive. The philosophical dilemmas Karna faces (caste, loyalty, dharma) are secondary to his relationship with Uruvi, which moulds the reader's perception of his internal struggles. Characterisation of Duryodhana and Kunti in *Karna's Wife* also cannot be justified, as their roles are shaped by Uruvi's personal biases where Duryodhana is seen as a loyal friend and Kunti is seen as an antagonist.

### **Conclusion**

There are several limitations of narrative reinvention of characters can be seen in the retelling of epics such as *Karna's Wife*. Although the shift from zero focalisation (omniscient narration) to internal focalisation (Uruvi's viewpoint) deepens the emotional engagement of readers with Karna's character, it also imposes narrative limitations. By centring the story around Uruvi's personal experiences, the novel reinterprets the struggles of Karna through an emotional lens which leads to a romanticised and reductive portrayal of his moral and philosophical dilemmas.

These narrowed focalisations in the modern, character-driven approach raise questions about the compromises made while reconstructing the historical and cultural narratives. While such reinterpretations enhance the facets of storytelling by giving voice to characters, they may limit the scope of ethical, political, social and philosophical dimensions that the epic exhibited through multiple viewpoints. By excluding alternate focalisation, such as Karna's internal conflicts, Duryodhana's political strategies, or Krishna's divine interventions, the novel restricts readers from engaging with the broader ideological scope of the epic. Though modern retellings contribute to the transmission of epics like *The Mahabharata*, they also necessitate the

need for an investigation into the legacy shaped by these reconstructions.

Therefore, while *Karna's Wife* successfully presents the emotionally resonant perspective, it highlights the challenges of reinterpreting ancient epics like *the Mahabharata* through perspective-driven narratives.

**Sneha Kulkarni**

Doctoral Fellow

Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR)

University of Allahabad, Prayagraj

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