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## Myth and Mind: A Psychological Interpretation of Empowered Womanhood in Select Novels of Kavita Kane

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### ABSTRACT

Mythological narratives have long played a crucial role in shaping cultural perceptions of gender roles and moral values in Indian society. Classical epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata traditionally highlight the heroic deeds of male figures while presenting women in supporting or symbolic roles. In recent decades, however, contemporary writers have revisited these narratives to explore alternative perspectives, especially those of overlooked female characters. Kavita Kane is one of the prominent authors who reinterpret mythology through feminist storytelling. Her novels *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, *Sita's Sister*, *Menaka's Choice*, and *Lanka's Princess* present the inner lives and psychological experiences of women who remain largely marginalized in traditional epic narratives. This research paper analyzes the representation of empowered womanhood in these novels through a psychological lens. Drawing upon feminist psychology, humanistic psychology, and concepts of trauma and resilience, the study examines how Kane portrays mythological women as emotionally complex individuals capable of independent thought and personal transformation. The protagonists Uruvi, Urmila, Menaka,



and Surpanakha encounter social discrimination, emotional conflict, and moral dilemmas, yet they demonstrate remarkable psychological strength. The analysis reveals that Kane redefines empowerment not merely as rebellion against patriarchal norms but as the development of emotional awareness, ethical independence, and resilience. By emphasizing the inner struggles and self-realization of these women, Kane's narratives challenge traditional portrayals of female characters in mythology and offer a modern reinterpretation that resonates with contemporary readers.

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## Introduction

Mythology functions as an important cultural framework through which societies interpret moral values, social norms, and gender roles. In India, epic narratives such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have influenced literature, art, and social ideology for centuries. These epics are rich in heroic tales and ethical dilemmas; however, they are often narrated from male perspectives. Female characters appear in these narratives, yet their roles are frequently confined to those of dutiful wives, sacrificial mothers, or antagonistic figures.

As literary discourse evolved, scholars and writers began questioning the traditional portrayal of women in mythology. Modern mythological fiction attempts to re-examine ancient narratives by focusing on characters whose voices were previously unheard. This shift reflects broader social changes that encourage gender equality and the recognition of women's experiences.

Kavita Kane is among the writers who have contributed significantly to this emerging genre of mythological retellings. Her novels revisit familiar epic stories but shift the narrative focus toward women who were previously marginalized in the original texts. By reconstructing these narratives through the emotional and psychological perspectives of female characters, Kane offers a new interpretation of mythological events.

The novels *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, *Sita's Sister*, *Menaka's Choice*, and *Lanka's Princess* represent four distinctive portrayals of women whose lives intersect with major events in the epics. Uruvi, Urmila, Menaka, and Surpanakha are often minor characters in classical mythology; however, Kane transforms them into central protagonists whose thoughts, emotions, and struggles shape the narrative.



This paper aims to analyze how Kane constructs empowered female identities by exploring the psychological dimensions of her characters. Rather than depicting empowerment solely through external achievements, Kane emphasizes internal growth, emotional resilience, and the courage to challenge social expectations. Through these narratives, mythological women become active participants in shaping their own destinies.

## **Literature Review**

The reinterpretation of mythology through feminist perspectives has become an important area of literary scholarship. Traditional mythological narratives often reflect patriarchal structures that limit women's autonomy. Feminist criticism therefore seeks to reinterpret these narratives in ways that acknowledge women's voices and experiences. Scholars argue that retelling myths from female viewpoints allows writers to question long-standing cultural assumptions. By examining the motivations, emotions, and choices of female characters, contemporary authors can reveal aspects of mythology that were previously overlooked.

In Indian literature, mythological retellings have gained popularity in recent years. Writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane have explored female perspectives within epic narratives. Their works challenge the stereotypical portrayal of mythological women as passive figures. Research on Kavita Kane's novels highlights her effort to humanize mythological characters. Instead of presenting them as symbolic representations of virtue or vice, she portrays them as individuals who experience love, doubt, frustration, and hope. This psychological depth allows readers to connect with characters who were previously perceived as distant mythological figures.

Academic discussions of Kane's work often focus on themes such as gender identity, resistance against patriarchal norms, and the reinterpretation of myth. Her narratives emphasize the emotional struggles faced by women who live within restrictive social environments. Through introspection and personal choice, these characters gradually develop a sense of agency. Although several studies discuss the feminist aspects of Kane's novels, fewer analyses have examined them from a psychological perspective. Understanding the emotional and cognitive development of these characters can provide deeper insight into how Kane constructs empowered womanhood.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study applies a combination of psychological theories to examine the experiences of Kane's protagonists.



### **Feminist Psychology**

Feminist psychology explores how social expectations and gender roles affect women's mental and emotional experiences. It challenges the assumption that psychological development occurs independently of social context. Instead, feminist psychologists emphasize that women's identities are shaped by cultural structures that often privilege male authority. In the context of Kane's novels, feminist psychology helps explain how female characters negotiate their identities within patriarchal societies.

### **Humanistic Psychology**

Humanistic psychology focuses on personal growth and self-actualization. According to theorists such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, individuals strive to realize their full potential by developing self-awareness and autonomy. Kane's characters frequently undergo journeys of self-discovery that align with these ideas. Their experiences illustrate how adversity can lead to emotional maturity and self-understanding.

### **Trauma and Resilience**

Trauma theory examines the psychological impact of distressing experiences. Individuals who encounter trauma may develop coping mechanisms that allow them to adapt and grow stronger. Many of Kane's protagonists face emotional challenges such as rejection, loneliness, or humiliation. Their ability to overcome these experiences demonstrates psychological resilience.

### **Psychological Empowerment in *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen***

In this novel, Kane shifts the focus of the Mahabharata narrative toward Uruvi, a princess who falls in love with Karna. Although Karna is a heroic warrior, his uncertain lineage leads society to treat him as socially inferior. Uruvi's choice to marry him therefore becomes an act of defiance against established norms.

“Princess, you have decided to follow the hard path. I cannot promise you the life a royal princess deserves,' he began slowly. 'I am a wanderer myself, stuck in an eternal search. I am a vagabond who doesn't know where I am going. My past beckons my present, but I can see only a blurred future. All my life, I have been slighted as a person of low birth—and the stigma will rub off on you as well. Yet, I am not ashamed of who I am...” (Kane 34)



This quotation highlights Karna's awareness of social discrimination and reinforces the psychological conflict surrounding identity and status in the novel.

### **Identity and Individual Choice**

Uruvi's decision reflects her determination to follow her own values rather than conform to social expectations. By choosing a husband based on emotional connection rather than status, she asserts her independence. Her choice also reveals her ability to recognize Karna's inner qualities despite society's prejudice.

Although Uruvi loves Karna deeply, she is troubled by his association with Duryodhana and the Kauravas. She understands that Karna's loyalty may lead to destructive consequences. This internal conflict demonstrates her capacity for critical thinking and moral reflection. Throughout the novel, Uruvi remains emotionally resilient even when confronted with social rejection and personal disappointment. Her ability to maintain compassion while defending her beliefs illustrates a form of psychological empowerment.

"Morality is not a rigid formula of mathematics. No standard of it can be laid down for all times, and for all situations." (Kane 118)

This line illustrates the novel's exploration of ethical complexity and reflects Uruvi's critical view of rigid moral judgments.

### **Emotional Resilience in *Sita's Sister***

In *Sita's Sister*, Kane revisits the Ramayana from the perspective of Urmila, Lakshmana's wife. While traditional narratives pay little attention to her story, Kane explores the emotional consequences of Lakshmana's decision to accompany Rama into exile. Urmila must endure fourteen years without her husband. This prolonged separation causes deep emotional pain and loneliness. However, Kane portrays Urmila as a thoughtful and introspective individual who gradually learns to cope with this hardship.

Instead of allowing despair to dominate her life, Urmila uses solitude as an opportunity for reflection. She develops patience and emotional strength while fulfilling her responsibilities in the kingdom. In classical mythology, sacrifice is often portrayed as a passive duty of women. Kane presents Urmila's sacrifice as a conscious and meaningful decision. By choosing to support Lakshmana's duty, she demonstrates both love and personal agency.



### **Agency and Identity in *Menaka's Choice***

Menaka is traditionally remembered as a celestial nymph whose beauty distracts sages from their spiritual practices. Kane's reinterpretation challenges this simplified depiction by examining Menaka's emotional struggles. As an apsara, Menaka is expected to follow the commands of the gods. However, these expectations often conflict with her personal desires and emotional needs. This tension creates a sense of psychological burden.

Menaka's relationship with her daughter Shakuntala is one of the most emotionally powerful elements of the novel. Being forced to leave her child behind generates deep feelings of guilt and sorrow. These emotions reveal Menaka's humanity beyond her mythological role. As the story progresses, Menaka begins to question the authority that controls her life. By asserting her right to make decisions, she moves toward psychological independence.

### **Trauma and Identity in *Lanka's Princess***

In this novel, Kane reimagines Surpanakha as a complex and misunderstood character. Instead of portraying her as a villain, Kane presents her as a woman shaped by emotional experiences and social rejection. Growing up in the royal household of Lanka, Surpanakha struggles to find recognition within a family dominated by powerful male figures such as Ravana. This lack of acceptance contributes to her feelings of alienation.

The episode in which Lakshmana disfigures Surpanakha becomes a traumatic event that profoundly affects her identity. Kane depicts this moment not as comedic punishment but as an act of violence that strips her of dignity. Surpanakha's anger and desire for justice stem from her need to reclaim respect and recognition. Through her story, Kane challenges readers to reconsider the moral judgments traditionally associated with this character.

### **Empowered Womanhood**

Across these novels, several recurring themes emerge that define Kane's vision of empowered womanhood. Each protagonist makes choices that shape her own life rather than passively accepting social expectations. Kane's characters demonstrate deep emotional understanding and moral reflection.

Despite facing rejection, loss, or humiliation, they continue to grow stronger and more self-aware. By focusing on female perspectives, Kane transforms ancient narratives into stories that emphasize the psychological strength of women.



## Conclusion

Kavita Kane's mythological retellings represent a significant contribution to contemporary feminist literature. By focusing on the psychological experiences of marginalized female characters, her novels challenge traditional interpretations of mythology.

The characters of Uruvi, Urmila, Menaka, and Surpanakha demonstrate that empowerment can emerge through emotional resilience, moral courage, and self-awareness. Their journeys reveal that strength is not always expressed through physical power but through the ability to confront adversity and maintain personal integrity.

Through these narratives, Kane not only reinterprets mythological stories but also encourages readers to reconsider long-standing assumptions about gender roles within cultural traditions.

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