



The Reconstruction of Female Subjectivity in Kavita Kane's Mythological Retellings

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21394427>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 12-05-2026

Accepted: 29-06-2026

Published: 15-07-2026

Keywords:

Female Subjectivity, Feminist Retellings, Kavita Kane, Mythology, Agency, Feminism, Revisionist Mythmaking

ABSTRACT

Contemporary Indian mythological fiction has witnessed a significant transformation through the emergence of feminist retellings that revisit canonical narratives from the perspectives of marginalized female characters. Among the foremost writers in this genre, Kavita Kane has reimagined women from Indian epics and Puranic traditions, granting them narrative agency, psychological depth, and independent identities. Her novels challenge patriarchal representations fixed within traditional mythological texts and reconstruct female subjectivity through the voices of women who were historically silenced or relegated to the margins. This paper examines the reconstruction of female subjectivity in Kane's major mythological retellings, particularly *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013), *Sita's Sister* (2014), *Menaka's Choice* (2015), *Lanka's Princess* (2016), and *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019). Drawing upon feminist literary theory and revisionist myth-making, the study explores how Kane transforms peripheral female figures into autonomous subjects capable of self-expression, resistance, desire, and ethical decision-making. The paper

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argues that Kane's retellings constitute a feminist intervention that challenges androcentric mythology and creates alternative spaces for female consciousness within Indian literary discourse.

Introduction

Mythology has long served as a repository of cultural values and social norms. In Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, women frequently occupy secondary positions, often defined through their relationships with male heroes. Their voices, emotions, and perspectives remain underrepresented despite their crucial roles in shaping epic events. The rise of feminist mythological fiction in contemporary Indian literature has sought to address this imbalance by revisiting traditional narratives from women's viewpoints.

Kavita Kane occupies a distinctive place among contemporary Indian writers who engage in mythological retellings. Her works focus not on celebrated heroes but on overlooked women whose stories have remained hidden behind dominant patriarchal narratives. Through characters such as Uruvi, Urmila, Menaka, Surpanakha, and Ahalya, Kane reconstructs female subjectivity and presents women as active participants in history rather than passive observers.

The concept of female subjectivity refers to the recognition of women as conscious, thinking, feeling, and acting individuals rather than objects defined by social expectations. Feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, and Judith Butler emphasize the importance of recovering women's voices and experiences from patriarchal structures. Kane's novels perform precisely this task by transforming mythological women from symbols into subjects.

This paper investigates how Kane reconstructs female subjectivity through narrative re-centring, psychological characterization, resistance to patriarchal authority, and the assertion of female agency. By examining her major novels, the study highlights the ways in which feminist revisionism reshapes mythological narratives and contributes to contemporary discussions on gender and identity.

Feminist Revisionism and Mythological Retellings

Feminist revisionism involves revisiting traditional narratives and exposing the patriarchal assumptions embedded within them. Alicia Ostriker describes revisionist mythmaking as a process through which women writers reinterpret inherited myths to create alternative meanings. Such reinterpretations challenge dominant ideologies and recover suppressed female experiences.

Indian mythology provides fertile ground for feminist revisionism because many female characters are portrayed through masculine perspectives. Women are frequently idealized as devoted wives, obedient daughters, or self-sacrificing mothers. Their individuality is often overshadowed by moral expectations imposed upon them.

Kane's novels challenge these conventional portrayals by foregrounding female consciousness. Rather than merely retelling myths, she interrogates the structures of power that silence women. Her narratives shift the focus from heroic exploits to emotional struggles, ethical dilemmas, and personal aspirations experienced by female characters.

By doing so, Kane transforms mythology from a masculine archive into a space where women can articulate their desires, frustrations, and ambitions. The reconstruction of female subjectivity becomes an act of literary resistance against centuries of patriarchal interpretation.

Reclaiming Uruvi's Voice in *Karna's Wife*

Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen represents Kane's first major attempt to reclaim a marginalized female voice. Uruvi, a relatively obscure character in the *Mahabharata*, becomes the central consciousness through which the epic is reinterpreted.

Traditional narratives focus on Karna's heroism and tragic fate. Kane, however, shifts attention to Uruvi's experiences. Unlike many mythological women who passively accept social norms, Uruvi actively chooses her husband against familial expectations. Her decision to marry Karna challenges caste hierarchies and demonstrates personal autonomy.

Uruvi's subjectivity emerges through her emotional and intellectual independence. She questions social customs, critiques political alliances, and refuses to remain silent in the face of injustice. Her relationship with Karna is not characterized by blind devotion but by dialogue, disagreement, and moral reflection.

Kane portrays Uruvi as a woman capable of ethical judgment. She recognizes Karna's virtues while simultaneously criticizing his loyalty to Duryodhana. This critical perspective distinguishes her from traditional representations of wives whose identities revolve entirely around their husbands.

Moreover, Uruvi's experiences reveal the gendered dimensions of suffering. She navigates emotional conflicts, social prejudices, and personal losses while maintaining her individuality. Through Uruvi, Kane reconstructs female subjectivity as a complex process involving love, resistance, and self-awareness.

Urmila's Transformation in *Sita's Sister*

Among the most significant examples of reconstructed female subjectivity in Kane's fiction is Urmila, the protagonist of *Sita's Sister*. In the traditional *Ramayana*, Urmila remains largely invisible despite being Lakshmana's wife and Sita's sister.

Kane transforms this silent figure into a powerful protagonist whose thoughts and emotions shape the narrative. The novel explores Urmila's loneliness during Lakshmana's fourteen-year exile and her struggle to maintain emotional resilience.

Unlike the conventional image of the patient wife, Urmila possesses intellectual depth and political awareness. She participates in discussions concerning governance, dharma, and social responsibilities. Her opinions challenge the assumption that women should remain confined to domestic spaces.

The reconstruction of Urmila's subjectivity is particularly evident in her questioning of patriarchal interpretations of duty. She asks why dharma consistently demands sacrifices from women while privileging male experiences. Such questioning reflects a feminist critique of traditional moral structures.

Kane also emphasizes Urmila's emotional strength. Rather than presenting her as a victim abandoned by her husband, the novel portrays her as an individual who develops self-reliance and maturity through adversity. Her identity extends beyond her role as Lakshmana's wife.

Through Urmila, Kane demonstrates that silence should not be interpreted as absence. By giving narrative voice to a historically neglected character, she challenges the erasure of women's experiences from epic literature.

Menaka and the Politics of Female Desire

One of Kane's most radical interventions occurs in *Menaka's Choice*, where she reinterprets the celestial nymph, Menaka. Traditional mythology often depicts Menaka as a seductress sent by Indra to distract the sage Vishwamitra from his penance.

Such representations reduce Menaka to an object of male desire and divine manipulation. Kane challenges this perspective by exploring Menaka's inner world and granting legitimacy to her emotions and aspirations.

The reconstruction of female subjectivity in *Menaka's Choice* revolves around the recognition of female desire. Menaka is portrayed not merely as an instrument used by male gods but as an individual capable of love, longing, and independent decision-making.

Kane interrogates the double standards surrounding female sexuality. While male desire is often normalized in mythology, female desire is frequently condemned or controlled. By presenting Menaka's emotional experiences sympathetically, Kane challenges these patriarchal assumptions.

Menaka's struggle for autonomy reflects broader feminist concerns regarding bodily freedom and self-determination. She resists being defined solely by her beauty and seeks a meaningful identity beyond the expectations imposed upon her.

The novel thus reclaims a character traditionally associated with temptation and reconstructs her as a thinking, feeling subject whose choices deserve recognition and respect.

Surpanakha's Humanization in *Lanka's Princess*

Surpanakha is perhaps one of the most misunderstood female figures in Indian mythology. In conventional tellings of the *Ramayana*, she is portrayed as a grotesque demoness whose desire for Rama triggers catastrophic events.

Kane's *Lanka's Princess* challenges this reductive portrayal by presenting Surpanakha as a multidimensional individual. The novel explores her childhood, relationships, ambitions, and emotional struggles.

The reconstruction of Surpanakha's subjectivity begins with the rejection of stereotypical representations. Kane humanizes her by emphasizing her vulnerabilities and aspirations. She is no longer merely the catalyst for war but a woman shaped by familial and political circumstances.

The novel also examines the consequences of patriarchal control. Surpanakha's life is influenced by male authority figures who attempt to regulate her choices and suppress her individuality. Her rebellion against these constraints becomes a significant aspect of her subjectivity.

Kane's portrayal invites readers to reconsider historical judgments against women who transgress social norms. Surpanakha's desire, often treated as sinful in traditional narratives, is reframed as a natural expression of human emotion.

By restoring complexity to Surpanakha's character, Kane challenges the binary opposition between virtuous and immoral women that dominates patriarchal mythology.

Awakening Female Consciousness in *Ahalya's Awakening*

The story of Ahalya occupies a controversial place in Indian mythology. Traditionally depicted as a woman cursed for alleged transgression, Ahalya has often been interpreted through moralistic frameworks that emphasize female culpability.

In *Ahalya's Awakening*, Kane rejects these simplistic interpretations and focuses on Ahalya's psychological journey. The novel examines themes of desire, consent, punishment, and redemption.

Ahalya's subjectivity emerges through her quest for self-understanding. Rather than accepting imposed identities, she reflects upon her experiences and questions the social structures that condemn women while absolving men.

The title itself signifies a process of awakening. Ahalya moves from silence and marginalization toward self-realization and empowerment. Kane portrays her not as a fallen woman but as a conscious individual seeking truth and dignity.

The novel highlights the unequal treatment of women within patriarchal societies. Ahalya's suffering becomes symbolic of broader gender injustices that persist across historical periods.

Through her reinterpretation, Kane transforms a narrative of punishment into one of resilience and self-discovery.

Narrative Strategies in the Reconstruction of Female Subjectivity

Kane employs several narrative techniques to reconstruct female subjectivity.

First, she adopts female-centred narration that allows readers direct access to women's thoughts and emotions. This narrative strategy counters the male gaze that dominates traditional mythology.

Second, she emphasizes psychological realism. Her characters experience doubts, fears, desires, and contradictions that make them relatable and human.

Third, Kane uses dialogue as a means of resistance. Her protagonists question authority, challenge social norms, and articulate alternative perspectives.

Fourth, she redefines heroism. Traditional epics celebrate physical strength and military achievements, whereas Kane highlights emotional endurance, moral courage, and intellectual independence as forms of heroism.

Finally, she contextualizes mythological experiences within contemporary feminist concerns. Issues such as gender discrimination, bodily autonomy, and identity resonate with modern readers, making ancient stories relevant to present-day discussions.

Significance of Kane's Feminist Intervention

Kane's reconstruction of female subjectivity contributes significantly to contemporary Indian literature. Her novels challenge the authority of canonical interpretations and encourage readers to engage critically with mythology.

By foregrounding women's experiences, Kane democratizes mythological storytelling. Characters previously dismissed as secondary become central agents of meaning. This shift broadens the interpretative possibilities of epic narratives.

Her works also participate in a larger global tradition of feminist retellings, comparable to the reimagining of mythological women in contemporary Western literature. However, Kane's contribution remains uniquely rooted in Indian cultural contexts.

Importantly, her novels offer readers alternative models of femininity. Instead of idealizing obedience and sacrifice, they celebrate agency, self-respect, and critical thinking. Such representations challenge restrictive gender norms and inspire new understandings of women's roles within society.

Conclusion

The reconstruction of female subjectivity forms the central project of Kavita Kane's mythological retellings. Through novels such as *Karna's Wife*, *Sita's Sister*, *Menaka's Choice*, *Lanka's Princess*, and *Ahalya's Awakening*, Kane reclaims marginalized female voices and transforms them into active subjects of history and narrative.

Her reinterpretations challenge patriarchal mythological traditions by foregrounding women's experiences, emotions, and aspirations. Characters such as Uruvi, Urmila, Menaka, Surpanakha, and Ahalya emerge as autonomous individuals capable of resistance, reflection, and self-determination.

Kane's feminist revisionism not only enriches contemporary mythological fiction but also contributes to broader debates on gender, identity, and representation. By reconstructing female subjectivity, she creates a literary space where women are no longer confined to the margins of mythology but occupy the centre of their own stories.

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