

**Reinterpreting Patriarchy: Feminist Consciousness in Kavita Kane's
Mythological Fiction**

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Abstract

Kavita Kane writes in a unique voice in English, Indian writing today. She has created an ongoing fictional universe in her seven novels since 2013 *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, *Sita's Sister*, *Menaka's Choice*, *Lanka's Princess*, *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, *Ahalya's Awakening* and *Sarasvati's Gift*, in which girls are mentioned in passing, misrepresented, or not individuated at all in the Sanskrit epics. This paper proposes that rather than a series of discrete retellings, it should be understood as a cumulative anatomy of patriarchy, which isolates different mechanisms by which women are subjugated, as in caste endogamy and the marriage market in *Karna's Wife*, erasure of the wife left behind in *Sita's Sister*, the instrumentality of female sexuality in *Menaka's Choice*, the punishment of the markers' violated body in *Lanka's Princess*, the dynastic ambition and the women's bargaining in *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, the moral scapegoating of the violated woman in *Ahalya's Awakening*, and the displacement of female intellectual authority in *Sarasvati's Gift*. The paper presents how feminist consciousness of the protagonists of Kane emerges through a cycle of three steps: the experience of injustice, the formulation of that experience in words, and the negotiation of a viable space in an unchanging system, as described by three theorists: Uma Chakravarti's theory of 'Brahmanic Patriarchy', Gerda Lerner's historical account of the construction of 'Patriarchy', and Adrienne Rich's theory of 're-vision' and Simone de Beauvoir's theory of 'woman as the constructed Other'. The paper also looks at the major shortcomings of Kane's feminism: the exceptional woman hero, the genre of romance, her definition of caste as personal prejudice and her expository style. These limitations are inextricably linked to the popular form that has allowed her work to attain an unparalleled reach.

Keywords: feminist consciousness, Brahmanical patriarchy, mythological fiction, Indian writing in English, Uruvi, Urmila, Satyavati, Ahalya, re-vision and popular fiction, and caste and gender.

Introduction

The archive of this paper is Kavita Kane's published fiction between *Karna's Wife* (2013) and *Sarasvati's Gift* (2021)—read in standard English translation and compared against the work of her main peers in the genre—in Sanskrit epics. It is a close reading that focuses on the recurring situations instead of on the individual novels, because the argument in Kane's project is cumulative, and the argument emerges only when novels are put side by side.

The analysis is organized into four situations: the marriage transaction, the instant of public judgement, the quarrel between women over the way a man has behaved and the scene of the

protest that is articulate, but fails to produce a shift. Each occurs throughout the text in many different forms, and it is the changes that reveal Kane's thinking. The theoretical apparatus is a blend of Gerda Lerner's historical account of patriarchy, Uma Chakravarti's analysis of the caste-gender nexus in early India, Adrienne Rich's notion of re-vision and Judith Butler's account of subversion through imperfect performance (Lerner 239).

Several limitations apply. The paper does not discuss Kane's non-fiction, journalism or public commentary, which would be relevant to a fuller account of her intentions but is not considered in this paper as a text. It doesn't do reception research, but the questions of how devout readers cope with Kane's criticism are raised and left open for other methods. It translates Sanskrit texts for Kane instead of reading them in the original, which means that there are some things that cannot be said about how she interprets certain details within her texts. It is a criticism that makes evaluative judgements about her prose that some readers will object to; and it is a criticism that contains the conviction that popular feminist fiction is best served by the criticism which is prepared to make a distinction between its stronger and its weaker writings, and not by uniform endorsement (Rich 19).

A final clarification with regards to language. Throughout, Lerner and Chakravarti mean patriarchy in their sense, that is, as a historically created system of institutional arrangements, not as a synonym for the unpleasantness of men. Kane's novels are often read as portraits of cruel men, but the narratives are more interesting in terms of what they show are arrangements that create cruel outcomes even if the individual is not, and may be very much, the opposite of cruel. The distinction between feminist analysis and grievance is what lies in the narrative. The silencing of women's voices is echoed in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, who speaks of female confinement in her poem They shut me up in Prose.

They shut me up in Prose - As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet - Because they liked me "still" -
— Emily Dickinson 206).

The best economical starting point in Kavita Kane's fiction is Beauvoir's idea that 'femininity' is a social product and not a natural fact. Her novels, in fact, are long examples of the sentence. They both take a woman who has been turned into a thing (the faithful wife, the temptress, the demoness, the scheming matriarch, the polluted woman awaiting purification) and meticulously piece back together, patiently, the social process through which this reduction took place. Chakravarti argues 585 that what the tradition sees as the woman's nature, Kane sees as the woman's situation. Kane's path to fiction has been through journalism and the method shows. Her novels are investigative in nature: they ask who benefited from a particular arrangement, who was silent, what might the silent party have said? In the process she has produced a body of work which is more consistently argumentative than the majority of her peers in the genre, and less lyrical. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Panchaali is a voice and Kane's Uruvi is a case.

This is what I find to be both the limits and power of her project. The main argument of this paper is that all seven of Kane's novels can be considered as a coherent criticism of patriarchy that is more systematic than any of the novels suggests. Read singly, each book appears to be

a sympathetic portrait of a neglected woman. Together they describe the different institutional contexts in which women are subjugated and reproduced: marriage, caste, sexuality, reproduction, reputation, and knowledge. The latter is more apt than the former in describing what Kane does, because the term “patriarchy” encompasses more than just “mythology”. The subject matter is patriarchy and the material is the myths (Tyagi and Anand 109). The paper consists of five substantive parts. The first places Kane into the context that enabled her work to be created. The second sets up the theoretical framework, especially focusing on the caste-gender intersection. The third is a study of the character of the woman who is not a good wife – Uruvi, Menaka, Surpanakha – as Kane’s most effective analytical tool. The fourth follows the transition from silence to speech during which the feminists’ consciousness arises in her protagonists. The fifth deals with the constraints of the project. Conclusion evaluates what Kane has accomplished and what is beyond her method. *Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen* was published in 2013 with Rupa Publications, five years after the success of *The Palace of Illusions*, which had proved that a fantasy novel from a woman’s perspective could sell like crazy in India. The timing matters.

The early 2010s saw the Indian English publishing industry actively looking to local authors for popular fiction – after the commercial success of Chetan Bhagat and, in the mythological genre, Amish Tripathi’s Shiva trilogy. Meenakshi Mukherjee defined and recognized a structural issue: How can Indian writing in English achieve cultural authenticity without foreign validation? (Shankar 352). The epics were public property and did not need to be translated nor explained. In that gap, Kane made a crucial and telling decision. She didn’t retell the Mahabharata and the Ramayana from the point of view of the main women of the story. She went out to the very edge of the edge. Uruvi, who marries Kṛṣṇa’s brother Karna is barely mentioned in the classical text, and Vrushali is mentioned, but a princess of Pukeya who has a quite rich inner life is roughly Kane’s creation. Urmila is a name, a lack in Valmiki. Surpanakha as an episode. Menaka is a musical instrument. Satyavati is much more present in the text, but it is usually interpreted as a political manipulator rather than as a woman calculating her children’s future. Ahalya is a moral illustration. Nearly no attention is given to Sarasvati subordination to Brahma in (Tyagi and Anand 109).

Such a choice is methodologically well-thought out. A woman that appears fairly prominently in the text needs to be negotiated with, and a woman that is almost entirely absent needs to be built and the that can be made to carry whatever analytical weight the novelist wishes. The nearly empty figures of Kane are thus blank canvases on which the working of patriarchy can be displayed in unencumbered fashion. But the price is that her heroines might feel designed, not discovered — orchestrated to prove a point. Kane needs to be placed in a greater context than just an innovator, but part of a longer genealogy. A. K. Ramanujan has shown that there is always been a plurality of tellings of the Ramayana, and Paula Richman’s anthology of women’s telling traditions reveals that Sita’s grief, not Rama’s righteousness, structures the narrative of the Ramayana (Ramanujan 49). Perhaps to prove that there was a woman-centred Ramayana that existed four centuries before the time of Kane, Nabaneeta Dev Sen was able to recover the sixteenth-century Bengali poet Chandrabati’s work. Nabaneeta Dev Sen recovered

the work of the sixteenth-century Bengali poet Chandrabati to prove that a Ramayana written by a woman existed four centuries before Kane. In Odia, *Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Ray has reconstructed Draupadi's interiority in 1984 (Millett 25); in Telugu, Volga's stories would transform Sita much more than Kane's do. What makes Kane special is not the way she retells the story but the orderly, organized seriality of her project and the selection of the English popular novel that she uses to convey it. Gerda Lerner's historical claim that patriarchy is not a "natural state," but a system with a datable beginning, that developed when men took over women's reproductive power provides the basic framework for interpreting Kane. The relation of the sexes is itself a political relation of domination and subordination, which is the point Kate Millett made earlier; this sharpens the film. And the key theoretical argument for Indian material is Uma Chakravarti's argument that patriarchy in early India was structurally bound up with caste: an endogamous caste order can reproduce itself only if it has a control over the sexuality of its women (585). In this narrative, female chastity is not the primary value, but it's a device for the maintenance of the caste boundaries.

It's intentional and it's a juxtaposition that Kane repeatedly highlights herself. Her novels are brimming with men who idolize women in general and trash them in particular. Bhishma's oath, which Kane investigates in *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, is considered to be the greatest act of filial abandonment, and in this novel, Kane demonstrates the price the women of his world pay for it—Satyavati who is left to bear the burden of having asked for it; Amba, who is left to live without it. What is good for one eye can be bad for another. For Kane, marriage is the main institution and she treats it all the time as a business deal in which women are the commodity. *Karna's Wife* is a point made through an apparently freewill choice on Uruvi's part, but she can only choose from a space already constructed by caste and her own choice of a suta-raised man turns her from an exemplary princess to a social problem. The thing that Kane does well is the machinery of consequence—the ostracism, the family breakup, the redefinition of her character by other people. What she demonstrates less is that the machinery is more a system than a collection of isolated prejudices. The tragedy of Uruvi is told more in terms of the cruelty of the snobish people than in terms of the operation of varna endogamy, which is an important difference in the analysis of the text (Chakravarti 585). Reproduction is a second location. *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* is perhaps the most interesting novel for this reason: Satyavati is not a victim, but an agent who plays the system that is restricting her.

A fisherman's daughter, she trades her marriage for a demand that her sons rule the kingdom, thus gaining real power from a system where her only power is the power to reproduce. Kane will not sentimentalise her: the novel is very clear that Satyavati's success comes at the expense of others, including other women. This is a more advanced feminist stance than the innocent-victim one, and it looks forward to Sangari and Vaid's feminist approach to historiography, which is that women have been agents in as well as victims of patriarchal structures (Kane 120). The third site is Reputation and *Ahalya's Awakening* tackles it right head-on. In the classical stories Ahalya is cursed with stone after being deceived by Indra, and only is redeemed by Rama's grace – in the stories a woman deceived is punished for the deception and then redeemed by a man's grace. What Kane proposes is to move the moral burden: the petrification

is now a symbol of the social death meted out to a woman whose sexual history is now her own and the awakening is self-recovery, not male absolution. The episode highlights exactly how caste-patriarchy makes the violation of a woman her fault (Kane 120) alongside Chakravarti. What Kane can do best is to maintain her focus on women who fail, refuse or are disqualified to be the sanctioned wife. The range is shown by three figures. Uruvi is an outlier because of his relationships. She is wed into her class, but not her caste; and the novel tracks the slow disintegration of her class as a result. She is the kind of value to Kane that she's insider enough to be heard in courts and assemblies, outsider enough that she sees how they work. She can say what she will about Kunti in the novel, and an encounter between two women about the fate of a third is a typical Kane scene: patriarchal injuries being explored by the woman who took them in. It's functional, if Menaka is deviant. She is a nymph, a female deity in India; in the classical context, she is merely a figure in existence to be dispatched — a weapon in Indra's arsenal against ascetic power. Kane's novel restores the elementary condition of subjecthood by giving her motive, preference and regret. The key gesture is the abandonment of Shakuntala and her treatment of it is instructive: not excused, it reveals an architecture of constraint in which it appears. Beauvoir gives her account of the Other, woman, who is always being constructed within the framework of a male subject, and never as a subject. Beauvoir's account of woman as the Other, that is, always constructed within the framework of a male subject, but never as a subject, is the canonical position of Menaka. The novel's work is to convert an Other into an I (Chakravarti 585).

The deviant aspect of Surpanakha's body is racialised. She wants, she offers, she's cut up for it—the episode has a tone not far removed from comedy in them tradition. *Lanka's Princess* does not accept this tone. The novel's title, Meenakshi — Kane's name for her, the one with fish-shaped eyes — is followed by Surpanakha, the one with nails like winnows — but the novel claims that the appalling name is not a description of an essence, but merely a construction of violence. The rakshasi's desire is monstrous because she is considered monstrous and not the other way around. The only time when the varna question that Chakravarti foregrounds comes close to a structural argument is when Kane's work touches on, but does not quite theorise, acts of violence performed on bodies outside the varna order. These figures together act as a surrogate for the kind of function that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar pinpointed for the nineteenth-century woman's madwoman in the attic; they embody the feelings that the woman used to be able to express.

Kane's freak women don't live in an attic, they're told stories. But their task is somewhat similar: They speak what the sanctioned wife cannot speak. According to Lerner, feminist consciousness is not just oppression but knowledge that one's subordination is mutual, unfair and changeable. This emergence is almost as predictable as it is in Kane's novels, and one is tempted to see a recurrent three-stage pattern throughout the collection. The first step is the recognition phase. The heroine sees that there is a difference between what she is told she is and what she feels she is. In *Sita's Sister*, Urmila notes that all in Ayodhya are grief-stricken over Sita and none are grief-stricken over Urmila; that while the tradition of "wifely duty" has been established, it has no place for the wife who must remain. Uruvi records that her husband's

dignity is provisional, and can be cancelled at any time. Kane's recognition is generally comparative—seeing that a rule applies to her that does not apply to the man next to her (Gilbert 79). The second stage is articulation. Kane's heroines speak, and a lot, and they have a lot of argument to carry in the novels. Here, Kane is at his best and his worst. Effective, for as Lerner says, the transformation from grievance to said argument is the very transformation that makes them conscious in his meaning; vulnerable, for the speeches often appear as if they are authorial position papers from a character that would not be able to plausibly produce them (Lerner 239). When Urmila speaks out with a considered account of her abandonment, the reader hears the novelist speaking for him or herself. This is the emphasis on speech and it has a literary counterpart in the Savitri of Dutt, whose protagonist begs directly for the god of death:

If speech be needful to obtain Thy grace,—

oh hear a wife forlorn, Let my Satyavan
live again And children unto us be born,
— (Dutt 37).

Rich's formulation sheds light on the purpose of Kane's articulations. They have no impact on results. Urmila continues to wait for 14 years, and yet Karna still dies, Surpanakha still gets cut down, and Ahalya is still rejected by Gautama. What speech does is create a record, it makes an event that has happened into an injustice that is named. The third step is the negotiation period. This is the point where Kane's script diverges most strongly from a radical feminist perspective, and where her commitment to social reality in Indian society is perhaps most faithful. Her heroines will not go away. They remain and they continue to build a viable place in an order they have correctly identified which they cannot manipulate. Uruvi is still *Karna's wife* and Kunti's antagonist and Urmila is still staying in Ayodhya and Satyawati is still the architect of a family that eats its own children. This pattern can be understood sympathetically in the context of the argument that Madhu Kishwar has developed for the relationship between Indian women and Sita, and that endurance can be interpreted as moral strength, rather than as a failure, and that it can be understood in terms of its own agency (Kishwar 31).

A less forgiving interpretation would observe that the romance story demands the heroine's presence, and that the book's structure prefigures the heroine's choice. Judith Butler's drawing on the concept of subversion by imperfect repetition of the norm best describes what Kane's heroines are actually doing (Butler 145). They enact being a wife, but not the right way, with an explanation, with a complaint, with a distance between the role and the person who does it. The missing link: the feminism. When compared to other principal practitioners of the form, Kane's accomplishment and her bounds are revealed. Pratibha Ray's Odia original *Yajnaseni* from 1984 was translated into English in 1995 and is thus more than 20 years ahead of the English boom in contemporary literature. While Ray's *Draupadi* has much to offer as a character with a depth of interiority, the novel's register is essentially devotional; the critique of the Pandavas is limited by a theological certainty of Krishna's piety. Kane is much less devout. Her gods are "political actors," petty, self-interested Indra in *Menaka's Choice* and the novel does not make a case for his manipulation of an apsara as a cosmic necessity, but as an abuse of power. One of Kane's real achievements is this secularization of the pantheon. In

contrast to Kane, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a technically gifted player. Kane's is a social panorama, in which several women argue amongst themselves, whereas Divakaruni offers one voice, intimate. *The Palace of Illusions* is a psychological novel; the novel of *Karna's Wife* is more of a novel of manners set in a court (Vijayan 142). The distinction has analytic implications. Divakaruni can depict the flavor of humiliation more aptly than Kane; Kane can depict the machinery which produces humiliation more aptly than Divakaruni, as Divakaruni's scenes contain the people who operate it. *The Liberation of Sita* is the point that Kane refuses to go over.

Volga completely dissolves the wifely frame and re-creates Sita's identity by linking her to the other women the epic left behind. This is not something that Kane does. Her heroines are not extricated from but embellished in their roles, and each of her novels concludes with the heroine, as an active player, in the same role but with a new understanding. It is an interpretation of her work which is essentially the central question in her work, whether it is realism or containment (Chakravarti 585). A third position, in contrast to the first two, is taken by Devdutt Pattanaik and his retelling project, which is neither fiction nor mythography but focuses on "comparative variants" and "symbolic exegesis" instead of on "interiority" (Gubar 78). Pattanaik's method proves, usefully, that it is destabilizing to just document the plurality of versions, since it eliminates the singular authoritative text against which a woman's deviation could be measured. This is not Kane's approach: her novels assume a more solid, canonical setting and dispute it. Lastly, Anand Neelakantan's asura-based fiction is the most closest to a caste critique, telling the epics from the point of view of the one who is left out of the varna order. What I think is the most important thing that needs to be addressed in her project is that Kane's Surpanakha and Karna approach the terrain but do not enter it, as I've argued above. Kane's novel on Sarasvati, which was published in 2021, is of note for its treatment of a topic not featured in most other novels: the removal of women's intellectual power (Nair 193). The story of Sarasvati's subordination – the placement of Sarasvati as the consort of Brahma, her relative marginalization in devotional practice, compared to that of Lakshmi and Parvati – is a telling example of how a culture may worship a female principle of knowledge without systematically excluding women from its institutions. The novel is not consistently well-done and allegorical themes are more apparent than characterisation. It is the final piece of the anatomy that this paper has followed. After marriage, caste, sex and reproductive behavior, and reputation, Kane now questions the goddess of learning and argues that there are hardly any temples dedicated to her.

The question links her fiction to a vast Indian feminist and feminist interpositionist scholarship on women's exclusion from Sanskrit learning, on the gendering of textual authority (Vijayan 142), and it suggests that Kane's project, as a work of fiction, does have a real analytical form, though not necessarily a strong one. The recurring technical difficulty in the Corpus needs to be addressed directly as it is an inherent part of Kane's method. Analysis is part of the everyday life of her heroines, and thus she needs them to articulate analysis. The characters give explanations to each other of their social conditions in a dialectic that is critic's language, not theirs. All three women reason with the audience about the asymmetry of wifely duty, the

injustice of being born a certain way, the classification of her body as monstrous (Rich 19). It is a genuine and something that should be called out. It is interesting to note that the same charge could be laid against a lot of politically charged fiction, and the alternative is a heroine whose suffering is without meaning. One of the reasons Kane's directness may be preferable to the alternative of the coded text is that it requires a decoding reader and that Kane's readership is not decoding readers of (Butler 145). In a popular feminist project, she has opted for the legible over the subtle; for a good, defensible decision.

Kane's novels have been quickly introduced into academia in India. These are on reading lists for reading undergraduates in India in the field of Indian Writing in English, in gender studies elective courses, and in a very large number of post-graduate dissertations. At the institutional level this is a phenomenon to be studied and has two effects to be mentioned. The first is interpretive narrowing. If a text is taught as an example of feminist revision, it is likely to be read to find the thesis, and over and over again a scholar will conclude that Kane represents a voice of a voiceless woman. The observation is true, and it is [now] played out. What is still insufficiently explored is Kane's approach to "time", her treatment of big casts, her employment of dialogue as an analytical tool, and her interaction with the regional-language traditions she uses, along with the problem of how the epics' devotees, who view them as scriptures, process her critique — something that needs to be studied through reception research instead of textual analysis (Tyagi and Anand 109).

The second is the effect of legitimization. These novels are now part of syllabus and the reading of epics feminist style has become a commonplace affair in English departments of Indian universities, where it would have been a specialty a generation ago. So it's a big institutional change, and part of what created it is her lack of style, which makes her prose unremarkable. One strand in the corpus is worthy of separate attention as it is the one area in which Kane is most contemporary and least classical – the question of consent. It is not a word that is part of the epics' vocabulary. Women are won, awarded, abducted, exchanged, invoked and bestowed and the texts assess these transactions by the criteria of dharma, lineage and legitimate procedure rather than by the woman's assent. Kane is always the one to add the missing criterion and many of her conflicts with the source in her fiction stem from this one anachronism (Tyagi and Anand 109). *Menaka's Choice* is the most obvious one. In the classical frame, the question is not about what is Menaka's desire, but she is sent away. Kane's novel makes that the instrument is no longer the only thing that's responsible for the outcome, and thus she becomes morally responsible in a way that she never was before. The transfer of accountability actually means the transfer of personhood and this is something that Kane knows, because her Menaka is more accountable and more human than the apsara of the tradition, and her two increases are the same as the two increases of the latter. The same logic is followed in *Ahalya's Awakening* by means of deception. Indra assumes the form of her husband, Ahalya, and whatever happens, happens without knowledge or consent of the husband. The reply of the classical tradition is to stone Ahalya and wait for Rama's mercy. Kane's answer: to use it as a fig leaf for social death that has been thrust upon a woman whose sexual past is now known, and as a self-recovery mechanism instead of a male absolution.

Together with Chakravarti, this is an exact literary translation of how a woman's violation is transformed into her moral failing, by caste-patriarchy (Chakravarti 585).

The Fisher Queen's Dynasty messes with the thread in a productive manner. Satyavati agrees, indeed bargains — and her bargaining comes at a high price for others, including Bhishma, for whom the negotiation is not a freely given one, but Amba, whose life is destroyed by the effects. Kane thus does not fall into the fallacy of “consent as magic elixir. A woman can agree and be “under duress”, and agree and be successful and be an active participant in a system that will destroy other women. The portrayal of women as agents as well as subjects in the patriarchal arrangements is rendered here in an unusual manner by Sangari and Vaid (Vālmīki 20).

What Kane doesn't do is take the analysis to its structural end. Consent implies a subject who has choices, and the novels rarely consider what are the resources needed to create such alternatives: property, education, kinship support, refusal without social annihilation. The material conditions of its exercise are not introduced, the vocabulary is. This too is the signature form of Kane's feminism: the individual diagnosis of the right kind of diagnosis. If a writer is to be of use to a field, the limits must be stated clearly in a serious assessment, criticism that does nothing but praise is no good.

The first one is the exceptional heroine. All of the Kane protagonists are exceedingly clever, exceedingly eloquent, exceedingly insightful. This is the norm in popular fiction and this is also analytically expensive: If the woman who can see through patriarchy is exceptional, then the grip of patriarchy on ordinary women is left unchallenged and even naturalised. The novels do little to indicate collective female action; solidarity between women, if it is there, comes not as politics, but as friendship. In this case, it's these opposite errors—warning against constructing women as a pre-given unity—a warning that is relevant in reverse to Chandra Talpade Mohanty's warning against constructing women as a pre-given unity: Kane avoids that error, but suffers from its opposite, an individualism in which each woman's struggle is her own (Chakravarti 585).

The second limit is the romance frame. Kane's novels are sold and organised as love stories, which puts a limitation. The most important relationship of the heroine is with a man; her arc is completed by this relationship; and the idea of a life organised something other than a man, the idea that Sita of Volga reaches, is largely unavailable. *Karna's Wife* is not a novel about what Uruvi might have been. It's a novel about a marriage.

The third restriction is in regards to caste. Even though caste is all important, and Surpanakha is a rakshasi, and Karna is a suta, in the case of Kane caste is used primarily as a class-based mark of shame rather than as a material-based social class with concrete material effects. In the plots of Kane, the central idea of Chakravarti's analysis, that the control of women's sexuality is there in order to maintain caste boundaries, is dramatised without being mentioned in her analysis (Chakravarti 585). A Dalit feminist critique would go further, the women of the forest peoples, of the servant classes, of the households that provide labour rather than lineage remain invisible in Kane's retellings, just as they were in the originals.

The fourth limit is devotional. For many of Kane's readers, the epics are living scripture and the novels play within the confines of that fact. Rama can be presented as the one who is

unyielding, Krishna as the one who plays with people, Indra as the one who is despised, but not to the point where they stop being objects of worship. This is a business issue that has now turned into an aesthetic issue (Mohanty 88). The fifth restriction is the stylistic one. The prose is decent, not brilliant; the dialogue tends to lecture; the emotional tone is stated, not conveyed. It's not a criticism of the work, however. It is to separate the argumentative contributions of a book from its literary achievement and to demand that popular feminist fiction be treated as seriously as any other piece of writing, even they have to be treated as seriously as any other piece of writing. There is one truth of scale which must be balanced against this. Kane's novels have touched a readership which academic feminism in India cannot reach, and will never reach. She is a young reader in a small town who is invited to think about the tradition that he's inherited and whether it was organised against him. Whether the prose is good or bad that is quite a political feat (Tyagi and Anand 109).

Conclusion

Kavita Kane's mythological fiction is best read as a series of investigations into the functioning of patriarchy, through the narrative material with the most cultural authority in India. Her approach is always consistent: she chooses a woman whose role has been defined for her by tradition, she reconstructs the social process that made her so, and then she restores her right to recognition, to speech and finally to refusal to be saved. The novels wouldn't be wish-fulfilment if everyone was rescued. The 14 years of Urmila's life are not abnormally curtailed, Surpanakha's face is not restored and Ahalya's abandonment is not reversed. What does the reader's understanding of what happened change? What does the reader's understanding of who is responsible for what change?

The feminist consciousness in Kane can be followed with a recognizable trajectory; it moves from recognition to articulation to negotiation, but stops short of the end point of change. One might ask whether this is a result of lack of ambition on the part of Indian women or an accurate representation of the circumstances in which Indian women have historically had agency, but this paper has been deliberately ambiguous as both interpretations are valid. Kishwar's story of endurance as proof of moral worth carries with it the second reading, while Lerner's insistence that feminist awareness reaches its fruition when we realize that the order is changeable carries with it the first. It's safe to say that Kane has expanded the playing area. Peripheries that were not the epic women's were available primarily to scholarship and regionally to oral tradition, before her. They are now published to mass readers of English as topics with histories, grievances and arguments. The next phase of this work, which Kane hasn't done, would be for women to work together, not just as individuals; for caste to be analysed, not just felt; and for forms other than the retrospective romance. These are things that other writers should do. The attempt to make the question askable has been significantly made. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's poem *We As Women* speaks to the importance of collective female action, stressing the need for women to proceed together: Kane has gathered a certain band of women in his space: the ones the epic named once and then forgot. It is not a disqualification that the writing is popular, not experimental, negotiated, not revolutionary. Popular, not

experimental; negotiated, not revolutionary, is a fact of the writing, not of the market. The women are on the page and they are talking. It is now their turn to respond to what they say.

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