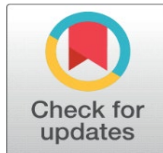
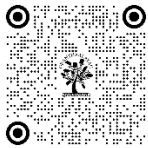


THE PROTAGONIST IN KAVITA KANE'S NOVEL "KARNA'S WIFE: THE OUTCAST'S QUEEN" FACES SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES - AN ANALYTICAL INVESTIGATION

S.N. Vidhyarthini¹✉, Dr. S. Bharathiraja²

¹Ph.D Scholar in English (PT), Reg. No. MKU21PFOL10272, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai

²Research Supervisor, Asst. Professor & Head i/c, Department of English, Vivekananda College, Thiruvudakam West, Madurai



ABSTRACT

This study analyses the socio-psychological challenges encountered by the protagonist in Kavita Kane's novel "Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen," exploring the factors contributing to the socio-psychological difficulties faced by marginalised individuals throughout the historical era portrayed in the book. This study aims to investigate the existing social circumstances during that period and evaluate their influence on causing psychological discomfort in the main character. The Freudian psychological perspective asserts that the source of psychological distress is located in the unconscious mind, while the Marxist perspective argues that it is grounded in the current material circumstances of social existence. The use of the Marxist literary critical approach is crucial for doing this research, as it allows for the analysis of the dialectical relationship between the human psyche and the prevailing social relations during that period. It is said that social discriminations can have negative effects on persons' socio-psychological well-being, and this was also the case for Karna.

Corresponding Author

S.N. Vidhyarthini,
Vidhyavijay76@gmail.com

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1. INTRODUCTION

The entrenched hierarchical caste system has persistently plagued the consciousness of the marginalised population in the Indian subcontinent, profoundly affecting their mental states. Despite the Indian government's abolition of the practise of untouchability shortly after India gained independence, the Dalits continue to face social ostracism and humiliations in India. Even in a democratic society, the most socially disadvantaged caste groups are still not receiving equitable treatment. In cases where an individual from a higher social caste marries someone from a lower social caste, the person from the higher caste may face disownment and rejection from their family and relations. Conversely, the person from the lower caste may, at times, experience acts of violence. This harsh socioeconomic reality continues to be apparent in Indian society. It is easy to envision the extent to which individuals of the lower social standing were subjected to humiliations in the old caste-based Indian society. The purpose of this paper is to examine and analyse the

socio-psychological challenges faced by the main character in the novel *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. The focus will be on analysing the protagonist's problems in different situations and exploring the historical and social factors that contribute to these issues.

The novel's narrative, which is a reimagining of *the Mahabharata*, takes place during the period known as the "age of transition" between the Vedic era and the post-Vedic era. The social stratification of humans into Varnas has been determined by the age. According to the Purusha Sukta, a hymn in the *Rigveda*, individuals are classified into four Varnas based on their birth from a single primordial being (N. Joshi). Brahmins are said to have originated from the cranial region of the primordial entity, Kshatriyas from the upper extremities, Vysyas from the lower extremities, and Shudras from the lower limbs. The text does not provide any information on the origin of Dalits, who were referred to by many names such as Nishadas, Panchamas, etc. They were classified as "Avarnas," which denotes individuals who are excluded or without caste.

While the original purpose of implementing the Varna system was to relieve a "Varna citizen" (N. Joshi) from excessive social production tasks, it later became a means for the ruling class to oppress and control the common people. Under the Varna system, the people were compelled to closely conform to the Manu code. The Varna people were apprehensive that they would also be marginalised unless they adhered to their assigned socio-economic responsibilities under the Varna system. In addition, the Vedic religion (which was not yet referred to as Hinduism at that time) also proclaimed that those who transgress the established boundaries of the Varna system are not qualified to achieve Moksha, the everlasting release from the repetitive cycle of human existence. The story of *the Mahabharata* is thought to have occurred within this socio-religious context.

Kavita Kane's novel, "Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen," is a reinterpretation of the renowned ancient Indian epic, Mahabharata, traditionally attributed to the sage Veda Vyasa. According to historians, the Mahabharata, which has been orally transmitted for many generations, was written around the 4th century BC or possibly much earlier. Since then, other scholars have undertaken the task of rewriting the epic across multiple generations. This internationally acclaimed masterpiece was also translated into English and various regional languages in India. In addition to the significant endeavours to make the epic more accessible to the general public, numerous researchers and authors adapted it into a shorter format or novel genre. C. Rajagopalachari and K.M. Munshi, prominent Indian freedom warriors, authored and published a prose rendition of *the Mahabharata*. In 2013, Kavita Kane authored a novel that portrays the story of Karna, a prominent figure in *the Mahabharata*, through the lens of a fictional character named Uruvi. This work offers a modern perspective on the events of the epic, examining and evaluating them from Uruvi's point of view.

The author recounts the narrative, with Karna as the main character and Uruvi, Kunti, and Draupadi as the other key figures. Karna desires a legitimate social status, but his biological mother, Queen Kunti, is reluctant to publicly disclose the truth that Karna is her son, conceived with the assistance of a divine mantra from the sun god (Lord Surya) before her marriage to King Pandu of Hastinapur. Uruvi, the princess of Pukeya Kingdom, selects Karna as her choice in the swayamvara, a regal event where the princess chooses a king to marry based on her preference. Karna's significant psychological difficulties can be attributed to underlying societal factors that have contributed to his damaged mental state.

2. KARNA THE PROTAGONIST

Karna's troubles commence from the moment he is born to Kunti, an unwed princess who conceives him through a divine chant with the sun god. Out of fear of revealing the truth about the birth of her illegitimate child, she carefully wraps the infant, places it into a container, and sets it adrift on the river. Athiratha, a charioteer in the army of Hastinapur, comes across the kid and entrusts it to his wife, Radha. They are overjoyed, as they have been unable to conceive children, to have obtained the exquisite infant. Through their nurturing and devoted guidance, Karna develops into a morally upright individual. Through his unwavering dedication, he attains exceptional skill as an archer. However, he falls short of attaining the same level of societal standing as both his friend and his adversaries.

Inter-caste marriages were forbidden as per the Manu code. Intra-caste marriages were formalised and rigorously regulated. Individuals who violate the established social boundaries are liable to face harsh consequences, including social ostracism, physical punishment, and several other forms of retaliation. Bojja Tarakam, a renowned progressive writer and social activist, asserts that the orthodox religion has been responsible for spreading and the State has aggressively encouraged this conformist mentality. The instances in which the religion proved unsuccessful were addressed by the State's administrative authorities, who typically imposed harsh penalties on individuals who violated the established boundaries (Tarakam).

Karna endures degrading encounters as a result of many societal and religious constraints. The protagonist's abysmal socioeconomic condition can be attributed to the prevailing marital system. During the age of the Mahabharata, intricate marital relationships were prevalent. During this period, the people exhibited a far higher level of religious devotion and strict obedience to the Manu code. For instance, a Brahmin is permitted to enter into matrimony with a woman belonging to the Kshatriya or Vysya caste. Nevertheless, he is prohibited from marrying a woman belonging to the Sudra caste. If the Brahmin in question is unwavering in his desire for the marriage, the Sudra woman must give her approval. However, it is important to note that once the Brahmin marries the Sudra woman, he forfeits his standing as a priest.

3. KUNTI'S FAILURE TO DISCLOSE KARNA'S TRUE IDENTITY

Karna experiences psychological pain due to Kunti's failure to disclose the truth about his birth. The primary factor contributing to her inability may be traced back to a specific incident that occurred during her childhood. The sage Durvasa, highly satisfied with her exceptional services during his visit to the realm of Kuntibhoja, grants her a divine mantra as a blessing. By employing this sacred incantation, she has the ability to summon any deity of her choosing and conceive offspring with them as desired. Nevertheless, driven by her naive curiosity, she desires to assess the power of the sacred incantation and recites it to invoke the deity of the sun. She is filled with disappointment when the sun god materialises in front of her. She becomes perplexed, but the deity of the sun assures her that she has not lost her virginity. Consequently, Kunti gives birth to a kid whom she abandons due to her apprehension of societal censure, as she had conceived the child before to marriage. Karna, the forsaken child, is raised by the Suta family. Subsequently, Kunti enters into matrimony with King Pandu.

Kunti's decision to remain silent is primarily motivated by the fact that she bears three children by the use of a divine mantra, as instructed by her husband, King Pandu. He is under a curse that prohibits him from engaging in sexual relations with any woman. Kunti gives birth to three offspring: Yudhishtira through her union with the deity Yama, Bhima through her connection with Vayu, and Arjuna through her association with Indra. When Kunti imparts the identical mantra to Madri, Pandu's second wife, she also gives birth to twins, Nakul and Sahadev, through the Aswini gods. This event provides evidence that polyandry was prevalent in India around the time of the Mahabharata. In his book "Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State," Engels discusses the practise of polyandry in various countries. He notes that polyandry was still being practised among the Nairs in India by the end of the 19th century. In this practise, three or four men share a wife, and each of them can also have a second wife who is shared with another three or more men. This pattern can continue with a third wife, fourth wife, and so on (Engels 33). During the era of Mahabharata, the practise of polyandry, characterised by certain distinct qualities, was prevalent. This social phenomena is evident in the portrayal of the character Kunti.

4. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO KUNTI'S INABILITY TO BE HONEST

The primary factor contributing to Karna's abysmal social status can be attributed to the intricate marital traditions prevalent during that era. During the prehistoric period, there were primarily three types of marriage. In the era of savagery, there were group weddings, while in the period of barbarism, pairing marriages are prevalent. As civilizations become more civilised, monogamous marriages become the norm, often accompanied with instances of adultery and prostitution as additional practises, as noted by Engels. The Mahabharata narrative is commonly attributed to the historical period known as the Iron Age, spanning from 1500 to 600 BCE. Furthermore, it is postulated that the narrative of this tale was not penned within the immediate years subsequent to the Kurukshetra conflict. Consequently, this narrative had been orally transmitted and recounted by individuals for numerous generations and epochs until it was eventually documented during the reign of the Gupta monarchs. Therefore, historians and scholars do not agree on the precise historical time in which the events of the Mahabharata epic took place. However, there is ample evidence that strongly suggests that the setting of this epic is in the Iron Age. The Iron Age is characterised by the widespread practise of monogamous marriages, indicating a high level of civilization.

Engels asserts that the institution of monogamous marriages evolved from a preceding system known as paired marriage, in which a man would have multiple wives, with one woman being designated as his primary wife, and similarly, the man would hold a significant position as a husband among the woman's other husbands (25). According to the author, in group marriages or even earlier, there was a practise of some level of pairing for a specific period of time. The male would have multiple wives, but among them, he would have a primary wife who had the highest importance to him. Their offspring were acknowledged based on their matrilineal descent. The practise of pairing weddings was not prevalent during the era of the Mahabharata, as this system was progressively being substituted or

nearly substituted by a monogamous marriage system in this era, which Lord Krishna referred to as "the age of transition."

5. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO HIS PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

According to Freudian theory, the psychological issues of an individual originate from the unconscious mind, which is a repository of emotions, thoughts, desires, and memories that are not consciously known to the person (Cherry, par. 8). In contrast to the Freudian view, the dialectical and historical materialism perspective posits that the human psyche is influenced by the material conditions of social existence. This implies that the factors contributing to the mental instability of the characters in literature, which often serves as a fictional representation of society, should be sought in the prevailing socio-economic structure of that society. The production system serves as the foundation for the establishment of the superstructure, encompassing politics, judiciary, culture, religious practises, and other related areas. A dialectical link exists between human civilization and the human psyche. Discriminatory social and economic factors contribute to mental disturbances in individuals, while certain individuals with disordered psyches instigate social unrest in society.

An exemplary instance of this is Karna, who, driven by a spiteful disposition, incites Duryodhana to publicly disrobe Draupadi in the court of Hastinapur in the presence of all. Cohen posits that criminal behaviour arises from excessive strain or dissatisfaction resulting from diseased social structures (Day & Marion, 2017: 249).

Within this particular framework, Karna, known for his moral uprightness, transforms into an average individual lacking mental fortitude. The profound insult inflicted upon him by Draupadi during her swayamvara ritual incites intense anger inside him, causing him to momentarily disregard his deeply entrenched principles of nobility. Nevertheless, Karna becomes aware of his mistake and desires to halt the atrocious incident, but his efforts prove futile. Subsequently, when interrogated by his spouse Uruvi, Karna collapses into his knees and erupts into weeping, recalling the incident of degradation that Draupadi endured in the court of Hastinapur. Karna admits his culpability to his wife, Uruvi, stating: "I shall not offer any defence, as my actions are shameful." Indeed, I have acted in a cruel and savage manner, engaging in the most despicable actions imaginable. I harbour intense self-loathing for my actions. I am aware that it has been a dreadful experience for you. The situation was characterised by an unending state of chaos and insanity.

6. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NOVEL IN MODERN ERA

In one of her interviews, Kavita Kane discusses the importance and pertinence of her novel, expressing her intention to shed light on the lesser-known aspects of the uncelebrated figure, Karna. During her interview with India book store, she states, "Karna, despite being highly respected and widely admired, remains an enigma, and his personal life remains completely undisclosed." He is perceived as either a rival to Arjuna or a comrade of Duryodhan, a tragic hero who is destined for failure and condemnation" (An Interview with Kavita, par. 3). While mythology may present an embellished portrayal of events from the prehistoric era, its significance remains intact. The Mahabharata has maintained its significance in the current day due to its distinct characteristics, including a concise discussion of the caste system, among other qualities. In a separate interview with R. Krithika, Kane asserts that mythology has been employed as a literary tool to depict present-day concerns and sensitivities.

In the new millennium, this work further intensified the readers' affection and admiration for Karna, a figure who was already greatly loved and respected. Karna, a personification of exemplary qualities, has endured societal prejudice and degradation from a young age. He was denied training in archery by Guru Dronacharya, opposed by Guru Kripacharya, barred from participation in the archery tournament, defamed as Sutaputra by Bhīma, and cruelly rejected by Draupadi at her swayamvara.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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