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Destiny Diverged- the Case of Caste in Kavita Kane's Karna's Wife

ABSTRACT

India is a country known for its rich and varied religions and cultures. One thing which is unchangeable in India is the caste/class consciousness in the minds of the Indians. This crucial anticonscious leads to the marginalization of the people belonging to the lower class that has been there from the ancient period. This kind of marginalization leads to the destruction of and sometimes aggressive reaction of marginalized people. Kavita Kane's novel *Karna's wife – The Outcast's Queen* shows how caste plays a very decisive role in a person's life and how a person's status is upturned. Kavita Kane views mythology as a reflection of the Indian culture. This paper is an attempt to study how caste is perceived by the characters in this novel, which is a retelling of Mahabharata. It also tries to prove that marginalization in the name of caste can lead to inhuman acts and destruction.

Kavita Kane is an Indian journalist, script writer and author, known for her retelling of the Indian tales in a different perspective. All her books are based on the Indian mythology. Her notable works are *Sita's sister*, *Menaka's choice*, *Lanka's Princess*, *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*. Among all *Karna's wife- The outcast's Queen* is the bestselling one. *Karna's Wife* is the novel in two aspects – it is her first novel and it is the first retelling of Mahabharata from Uruvi's point of view. By giving voice to one of the minor characters it is evident that the author is more concerned about the minorities. The whole novel speaks about how caste plays a destructive role in every human's life.

In India during the Aryan rule people were categorized into four main groups according to the work they did: they were *Brahmins*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras*. The word caste is derived from Spanish and Portuguese word “casta”. In India it is called as “jati” derived from “jana” and it means *taking birth*. Thus it is very clear that a person is separated in the name of caste when he/she is born. .

Caste system is prevailing in India from 1500 BCE so does the oppression and marginalization. During the *Vedic* period education was rejected to the group of people belonging to *shudras*. Caste and class is given paramount consideration when it comes to education and marriage during the ancient time and that existed in India for many years. An

Individual is judged not by the knowledge or by the skills he acquires but by the caste and class he belongs. This is evident in the case of Karna, who was persistently humiliated by many people in the novel, a humiliation that can affect a man's psyche to a great extent.

Karna, being one of the charming characters in the novel, was tyrannized because he is a *Shudra*. Though he is a born *Kshatriya*, he is raised as a son of charioteer due to an inexorable circumstance. He was not allowed to learn *Vedas*, which were exclusively learnt by the *Brahmins* and *Kshatriya*. Even Drona can be seen as persecutor, who deprives Karna from being his student.

Karna is enforced to dupe in order to learn skills from the great mentor Parashurama and to become a great warrior. The caste he belonged let him do a deceiving act. A great warrior, a born *Kshatriya*, an epitome of charity is forced to do a disloyal act, due to the place he was brought up in. A born *Kshatriya* is denied the status of *Kshatriya* throughout his lifetime.

The novel opens with the archery tournament in Hastinapur, which is arranged to exhibit the archery skills of the Kauravas and Pandavas in an open arena. That was the time when Karna entered the arena with a glow in his eyes which is much brighter than the sun. He goes there to prove that a *Sutaputra* is no less than a *Kshatriya*. But even before he exhibits his skill, he is rebuffed by the royals of Hastinapur.

“According to the rule of the game, only a *Kshatriya*, a high-born warrior, can fight another *Kshatriya* in a tournament” (4)

This incident is obvious and come to know how caste system was active in the Indian thinking system. By opening the novel this way the author is trying to exaggerate on the point that ‘caste’ is the deciding factor of everything that happens in an individual life. Though the epic dates back to 8th or 9th century by retelling it in the 21st century author is trying to show the pervasiveness of the caste system.

Caste in India is something which can never be eradicated and it holds its prominence even today in the education field and in marriage. Inter-caste marriages were not appreciated in the Indian culture. Yet people marry opposing all the norms laid down by the scriptures. Marrying a man from upper caste is considered a legitimate one and it is called *Anuloma* in the *Shastras*. In such case high-born women who marry lower caste men is against the *Shastras* and that is called *Pratiloma*. Uruvi, princess of Pukeya falls in love with Karna the moment she sees him in the archery tournament.

Before the day of Uruvi's *swayamwar*, she declares to her parents that she has fallen in love with Karna and wishes to marry him. At first the king of Pukeya rejects and explains her circumstances she will be forced to encounter if she marries Karna.

“You are a Kshatriya girl- you cannot marry a sutaputra” (18).

“Face reality, my child. Do you think you will upgrade his status by marrying him? No, you will worsen yours. You know how it goes in our society” (18-19).

When Uruvi chose Karna in her *swayamwar*, the other suitors and the royals started arguing in the great gathering about the rules of marriage. People were against the marriage. This shows the rigid caste system prevailed during that time. A woman is restrained to marry a low-born. She can either marry a man of same social status or she must die.

‘A *Swayamwara* means choosing a bridegroom from same social class- a Kshatriya bride cannot marry beneath her!’

‘She has to choose one among us, a Kshatriya’, Arjuna interjected pointedly.

‘If she does not care to marry a prince, she should either remain a virgin or jump into a pyre’.

‘The princess cannot marry a man of a lower caste!’ barked another incensed King. ‘Pratiloma is prohibited by the *Shastras*’. (34)

In spite of all the opposition Uruvi’s father stood by her and gave importance to the emotions of his daughter. As a father he was not worried about any rules of marriage or the caste his son-in-law belong. King Vahusha is one another character in the novel who is not concerned about caste or the rigid rules of *Shastras*.

“My daughter’s decision is her own and I, as a father, stand by it completely ... she has selected Karna, King of Anga, and he has won her hand in marriage. I appeal to everyone to respect the choice made at the *swayamwar*.”(37)

Like a coin has two sides caste system is accepted by a group of characters and it is also opposed by another group of characters in the novel. The author emphasizes on the fact that honour is gained through ones bravery and valour not by the caste he belongs to. The author speaks out her mind through the character Uruvi. She constantly neglects the caste and focuses on a person’s ability. This way the author is giving out a message to the young readers not to judge or marginalize people in the name of caste and class they belong to. It is wise to look for the good in people and ignore all the age old caste-based cultural practices.

When caste is neglected in the Vedic period itself by a woman, why not the same be practiced by the young minds of Indians. Though this act is in fact against the *Shastras* it only shows the brave and noble mind of a high-born woman. As a contrast there is a character in the novel, Draupadi, who acts according to *Shastras*. Draupadi rejects Karna in her *Swayamwar*, because he is a *Sutaputra* and deters him from taking up the challenge.

“You may be a king now, o king of Anga, but you are not of royal birth. I’m a king’s daughter and will not wed a base-born man...I will not allow a sutaputra to participate in the challenge. Please do not proceed.” (31)

Karna is humiliated by Draupadi in front of a large gathering. This incident brings rage inside the mind of Karna, which gets deep-rooted in his heart. All the suppressed emotions are therefore unleashed in an ugly manner. Karna avenges Draupadi for her humiliating act. When the Pandavas lose in the dice game, Karna grabs the opportunity to take revenge on Draupadi.

“Karna had encouraged Duryodhana’s brother Dushasana to drag Draupadi into the court and disrobe her.” (114)

How could a great warrior, a noble man can act like this and shut his ear to such an inhuman act. This is the result of oppression and humiliation endured by Karna, an outcome of his suppressed anger. Since he has been given the noble status by Duryodhana he chooses to stay silent for what was happening in the royal court.

Karna stood by Duryodhana in all the bad deeds and the unrighteous act. All that Karna wanted was a noble status. This is a natural longing of any low-born man. Karna is pushed to the level that he never raised his voice for unworthy act. This is because of his inner fear that if he voice out for the injustice, which will be against Duryodhana and his bonding with him will be affected. Duryodhana stood by Karna when he was humiliated and Karna wished to be loyal to him.

“I cannot *not* be his friend because of his flaws. You accept a friend with his faults, however bad.” (84)

Caste based oppression will change even a noble man to an ignoble man. This single act can prove that a man becomes aggressive due to the constant insults faced in the name of caste. All through the novel Karna is slandered in various forms and by various characters. There occurs a *false consciousness* in the minds of low caste people that they are low born and are meant to endure all the humiliation. This consciousness was inside the mind of Karna to some extent.

“All my life I have endured taunts, insults and humiliation for being sutaputra ... I was a low-born sutaputra who had dared to dream” (34)

Only three people, Duryodhana, Krishna and Uruvi, who are high-born, treat Karna as one among them.

Kavita Kane has thus tried to trace out how caste is perceived by the mythical characters and has also brought out how caste conscious can drag a noble person to do an

inhuman act. According to the author mythology is the reflection of human life. Mahabharata is more complex and has realistic characters. Each character in the epic can be associated with our real life

character. The humiliation endured by Karna has been experienced by many people in India. Caste based oppression has no end and that in turn will lead to destruction.

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