

Rewriting the Epic from the Margins: Feminist Counter-Narratives, Ethical Power, and Female Subjectivity in Kavita Kane's *Tara's Truce* with Reference to *Sita's Sister* and *Lanka's Princess*

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Abstract:

Feminist revisionist mythology has emerged as a powerful literary mode in contemporary Indian English fiction, challenging androcentric epic traditions and reclaiming silenced female voices. Kavita Kane's *Tara's Truce* (2023) exemplifies this trend by re-imagining the *Ramayana* through the perspective of Tara, the politically astute queen of Kishkindha. This paper undertakes *Tara's Truce* as a feminist counter-narrative that interrogates patriarchal constructions of power, *dharma*, and heroism. Through comparative analysis with Kane's earlier novels *Sita's Sister* (2014) and *Lanka's Princess* (2016), the study demonstrates how Kane systematically reconstructs marginal female figures as ethical agents and political thinkers. Drawing on feminist narratology, myth criticism, and gender theory, the paper argues that Kane's mythological retellings constitute a sustained epistemological challenge to canonical epic discourse by decentralising male heroism and privileging women's experiential knowledge.

Keywords: Feminist mythology, *Ramayana* re-tellings, Kavita Kane, female agency, revisionist narratives, epic discourse

Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have historically functioned not merely as literary texts but as civilisational scriptures that regulate moral conduct, gender roles, and social hierarchies. These epics derive their authority from religious sanction and cultural repetition, thereby naturalising patriarchal ideals of masculinity, kingship, and female virtue (Tharu & Lalita, 1991; Chakravarti, 2006). While male characters are celebrated for action, conquest, and moral decision-making, women are frequently reduced to symbolic roles, ideal wives, seductive threats, or tragic sufferers, whose value lies in their relational function rather than their subjectivity (Beauvoir, 1949/2011).

In canonical re-tellings, women such as Sita, Draupadi, Tara, and Surpanakha are framed within moral binaries of virtue and transgression. Their interior lives, ethical reasoning, and political awareness remain largely unexplored, reinforcing what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) identifies as epistemic violence—the systematic exclusion of marginal voices from authoritative discourse. As a result, epic women often appear as narrative objects rather than narrative agents, reinforcing androcentric authority within mythic tradition.

Over the last few decades, feminist writers have begun to dismantle this narrative hierarchy by revisiting epics through women's perspectives. This shift reflects a broader feminist intervention in historiography and literary studies that seeks to recover silenced voices and destabilise dominant narratives (Rich, 1972; Mohanty, 2003). Feminist mythological retellings do not reject epics outright; instead, they interrogate the ideological frameworks that

shape their meanings. By re-centering marginal women, these narratives transform myth into a contested space of ethical inquiry rather than a static moral code (Barthes, 1972).

Kavita Kane occupies a significant position within this literary movement of feminist revisionist mythology. Across her body of work, Kane consistently foregrounds women who remain peripheral, misunderstood, or morally vilified in classical texts. Her novels resist the glorification of epic heroism by exposing its gendered costs, particularly for women whose sacrifices sustain male power structures (Kane, 2014; Kane, 2016). Rather than portraying women as passive victims, Kane reconstructs them as ethical thinkers, political negotiators, and emotionally complex subjects.

Tara's Truce (2023) continues this feminist project by centring Tara, queen of Kishkindha, character acknowledged for her wisdom in Valmiki's *Ramayana* yet denied narrative centrality. In the epic, Tara's insight fails to alter the course of patriarchal violence, rendering her intelligence narratively ineffective. Kane challenges this marginalisation by reimagining Tara as the moral and political consciousness of Kishkindha, thereby transforming epic marginality into a site of resistance and reinterpretation.

This paper situates *Tara's Truce* within Kane's larger feminist corpus, particularly *Sita's Sister* (2014) and *Lanka's Princess* (2016), to argue that Kane's revisionist strategy systematically recovers women silenced by epic discourse. Through comparative analysis, the study demonstrates how Kane reclaims mythological marginality as a space for feminist agency, ethical critique, and narrative justice.

The theoretical foundation of this study is anchored in feminist literary criticism, feminist narratology, and myth studies. Central to this framework is Adrienne Rich's concept of re-vision, which defines feminist engagement with canonical texts as "looking back, seeing with fresh eyes, entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich, 1972, p. 18). Rich argues that re-visioning is not merely an academic exercise but a political necessity, enabling women writers to resist inherited narratives that erase or distort female experience.

In the context of mythological retellings, re-vision operates as a corrective mechanism that challenges patriarchal authority embedded in sacred narratives. Myths, as Roland Barthes (1972) observes, function as cultural codes that naturalise ideology by presenting historical constructions as timeless truths. Feminist reinterpretations disrupt this naturalisation by exposing myth as a mutable narrative shaped by power relations.

Feminist narratology further illuminates how shifts in narrative voice and focalisation alter ideological meaning. Susan Lanser (1992) emphasises that narrative authority is deeply gendered, and reclaiming voice is central to feminist storytelling. By relocating narrative focalisation to marginal women, feminist retellings contest whose knowledge is considered legitimate. In *Tara's Truce*, Kane's use of Tara's perspective reorients ethical judgement, compelling readers to reassess epic events traditionally viewed through male heroism.

Judith Butler's (1990) theory of constrained agency provides a crucial lens for analysing Kane's characters. Butler argues that agency does not require absolute freedom; rather, it emerges through negotiation within restrictive structures. Kane's women exemplify this form of agency. Tara does not overthrow patriarchal order but subtly reshapes it through ethical reasoning, political compromise, and moral resistance. Her decisions—particularly her

acceptance of political marriage—are framed not as submission but as strategic action within oppressive circumstances.

Additionally, Carol Gilligan's (1982) ethics of care enriches the analysis of Tara's moral stance. Unlike epic masculinity, which prioritises honour and conquest, Tara's ethics are relational, emphasising responsibility, compassion, and collective survival. This ethical framework challenges the rigidity of epic *dharma*, revealing it as gendered and selectively applied. Thus, Kane's mythological revision operates not through outright rejection of epic tradition but through ethical interrogation. *Tara's Truce* exemplifies a feminist reconfiguration of myth where political compromise, emotional intelligence, and moral ambiguity are redefined as strengths rather than weaknesses. By integrating feminist narratology and ethical criticism, the novel transforms myth from a monologic authority into a dialogic space of contestation and reinterpretation.

Kavita Kane's *Tara's Truce* reconfigures Tara not merely as a wise consort but as a political intellectual whose ethical reasoning and strategic foresight position her at the centre of Kishkindha's governance. By foregrounding Tara's consciousness, Kane challenges the androcentric epistemology of epic narratives, which traditionally locate political authority in masculine aggression and divine sanction. Tara's political subjectivity emerges as an alternative model of leadership grounded in care, negotiation, and moral accountability.

In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Tara appears primarily in moments of crisis, offering prescient warnings to Vali against confronting Sugriva and Rama. Despite the soundness of her counsel, her voice remains ineffectual within the epic's patriarchal logic, which privileges masculine valour over feminine wisdom. Tara's role is thus emblematic of what feminist critics describe as 'acknowledged yet disregarded intelligence' a condition in which women's knowledge is recognised but systematically marginalised (Spivak, 1988; Lanser, 1992).

Kane radically disrupts this narrative constraint by transforming Tara from a peripheral advisor into the narrative consciousness of Kishkindha. In *Tara's Truce*, Tara is not merely reacting to political events; she actively interprets, anticipates, and influences them. Kane endows Tara with multiple forms of knowledge, medical, political, emotional, and ethical, thereby constructing her as a holistic intellectual figure rather than a symbolic moral voice (Kane, 2023).

Tara's training as a healer is particularly significant. Healing, traditionally coded as feminine and domestic, is reimagined as a form of political knowledge. Through her understanding of bodies, suffering, and vulnerability, Tara develops a governance model rooted in preservation rather than conquest. This reframing aligns with feminist political theory that challenges masculinist definitions of power as domination, proposing instead relational and sustaining forms of authority (Gilligan, 1982; Nussbaum, 1999).

By granting Tara narrative focalisation, Kane shifts the ethical axis of the epic. Events traditionally framed as heroic are subjected to moral scrutiny through Tara's reflective consciousness. Her critique of Vali's hubris and Rama's intervention exposes the cost of patriarchal violence on both personal and collective levels. In this way, Kane destabilises the epic's valorisation of masculine aggression and redefines political intelligence as ethical foresight and emotional literacy rather than brute strength.

One of the most contested moments in *Tara's Truce* is Tara's marriage to Sugriva following Vali's death. In traditional epic readings, this act is often interpreted as a patriarchal necessity, an extension of women's objectification within dynastic politics. Kane, however, reframes this marriage as a conscious political strategy, thereby recuperating Tara's agency within constrained circumstances.

Drawing on Judith Butler's (1990) concept of constrained agency, Kane presents Tara's choice not as absolute freedom but as a negotiated decision within oppressive structures. Tara recognises that Kishkindha, destabilised by fratricidal conflict and external intervention, requires continuity and legitimacy. Her marriage to Sugriva becomes an act of governance rather than submission—an effort to prevent further bloodshed and political fragmentation (Kane, 2023). This reinterpretation resonates with Martha Nussbaum's (1999) feminist critique of liberal notions of autonomy, which often fail to account for women's lived realities. Nussbaum argues that agency must be understood contextually, especially in societies where women's choices are structurally limited. Tara's decision exemplifies this form of contextual agency, where survival, stability, and collective welfare shape ethical action.

Furthermore, Kane's portrayal complicates the epic trope of female sacrifice. Rather than romanticising self-denial, the novel exposes the emotional and psychological cost of Tara's decision. Her marriage is depicted as an act of political labour—an extension of her responsibility toward the kingdom. This aligns with feminist scholarship that recognises women's emotional and relational labour as integral to political systems, even when such labour remains unacknowledged (Chakravarti, 2006).

By reframing marriage as political strategy, Kane challenges the epic's gendered dichotomy between public power and private duty. Tara occupies both spheres simultaneously, collapsing the artificial divide that excludes women from political legitimacy. Her queenship under Sugriva thus represents not erasure but endurance—an assertion of ethical leadership within patriarchal constraint.

Through Tara's political intellectualism, *Tara's Truce* proposes an alternative model of power that stands in contrast to epic masculinity. While Vali and Rama embody martial heroism rooted in violence and divine sanction, Tara represents ethical leadership grounded in foresight, compassion, and accountability. This contrast exposes the gendered nature of epic power structures and invites a reassessment of what constitutes legitimate authority.

Kane's narrative suggests that the survival of Kishkindha depends less on heroic conquest and more on ethical governance—a form of power historically feminised and therefore marginalised in epic tradition. By elevating Tara's intellectual and moral authority, *Tara's Truce* performs a feminist redefinition of political power itself.

Tara's transformation from peripheral counsellor to political intellectual exemplifies Kane's broader feminist project: reclaiming women as thinkers rather than symbols. Through narrative authority, ethical reasoning, and strategic action, Tara challenges the epic's masculinist epistemology and asserts a feminine model of leadership that is both politically effective and morally rigorous.

One of the most radical interventions in *Tara's Truce* is Kavita Kane's ethical destabilisation of Rama's heroic stature, particularly in relation to his killing of Vali. In canonical versions of the *Ramayana*, Rama's act is justified through the doctrine of dharma,

often framed as divine justice enacted beyond human moral scrutiny. The epic narrative thus normalises moral absolutism, where divine authority overrides ethical accountability (Valmiki, trans. Sattar, 2005).

Kane unsettles this moral certainty by filtering the episode through Tara's ethical consciousness. Tara refuses to accept Rama's divine justification unquestioningly, interrogating not only the act itself but the moral logic that permits violence when sanctioned by authority. Her response exposes what feminist ethicists identify as the gendered blind spots of moral absolutism, wherein abstract ideals overshadow lived suffering (Gilligan, 1982; Nussbaum, 1999).

By privileging Tara's perspective, Kane foregrounds experiential ethics—an ethical framework that evaluates actions based on their human consequences rather than mythic legitimacy. Tara does not deny Rama's divinity; rather, she challenges the assumption that divinity absolves ethical responsibility. This repositioning destabilises epic heroism by insisting that moral authority must remain accountable to human cost. This narrative move aligns *Tara's Truce* with feminist ethical philosophy, particularly the ethics of care, which prioritises relational responsibility, empathy, and accountability over rigid moral hierarchies (Gilligan, 1982). Kane thus transforms dharma from a static, unquestionable principle into a contested ethical space, subject to reinterpretation through marginalised perspectives.

Kane's feminist revisionism gains greater depth when *Tara's Truce* is read comparatively with *Sita's Sister* and *Lanka's Princess*. Together, these novels reveal a sustained interrogation of how patriarchal epic discourse regulates women differently based on their conformity to prescribed roles.

In *Sita's Sister* (2014), Kane centres Urmila, whose suffering is rendered invisible in the epic because it unfolds within domestic space. Unlike Tara, who operates within political conflict, Urmila's pain emerges from prolonged emotional abandonment following Lakshmana's departure. The epic's silence around Urmila exemplifies what feminist scholars identify as the marginalisation of women's emotional labour—labour that sustains patriarchal heroism yet remains narratively unacknowledged (Chakravarti, 2006).

Kane reconstructs Urmila's interiority, revealing endurance, self-reflection, and emotional intelligence as forms of resistance. Urmila's strength lies not in public action but in psychological resilience, challenging the epic's valorisation of visible sacrifice over silent suffering (Kane, 2014).

When read alongside Tara, Urmila illustrates a complementary mode of feminist agency. While Tara negotiates power within political structures, Urmila resists through emotional autonomy and moral steadfastness. Together, they dismantle the false dichotomy between public power and private endurance, affirming that feminist resistance operates across multiple social domains.

Lanka's Princess (2016) offers perhaps Kane's most confrontational feminist revision by reclaiming Surpanakha, a figure traditionally demonised for her desire. In epic tradition, Surpanakha is reduced to a grotesque caricature, her punishment serving as a cautionary tale against female sexuality (Beauvoir, 1949/2011).

Kane humanises Surpanakha by articulating her longing, humiliation, and rage, thereby exposing how patriarchal narratives criminalise women who transgress sexual norms. Surpanakha's violence is contextualised as a response to systematic rejection and humiliation rather than inherent monstrosity (Kane, 2016).

When read alongside *Tara's Truce*, Surpanakha and Tara emerge as ideological counterpoints. Tara is respected because she conforms to patriarchal ideals of restraint and sacrifice, while Surpanakha is vilified for asserting desire. Yet both suffer under male power struggles, revealing how epic morality selectively rewards or punishes women based on their compliance with patriarchal expectations. Kane's feminist intervention lies in exposing this moral inconsistency at the heart of epic discourse.

Across *Sita's Sister*, *Lanka's Princess*, and *Tara's Truce*, Kane constructs a continuum of female subjectivity that resists monolithic representations of epic womanhood:

- Urmila embodies silent endurance and emotional labour
- Surpanakha represents transgressive desire and punished autonomy
- Tara symbolises ethical governance and political intelligence

Together, these figures challenge the epic's tendency to categorise women as either virtuous ideals or moral deviants. Kane's women are neither goddesses nor demons but complex individuals negotiating patriarchal constraint through varied forms of agency. This continuum reflects Judith Butler's (1990) theory of constrained agency, wherein resistance emerges not outside power structures but within them. Kane's characters exemplify how women exercise agency through endurance, defiance, negotiation, and ethical reasoning, thereby expanding feminist understandings of power.

Kane's revisionist mythology functions as a form of feminist historiography, recovering voices erased from cultural memory. By rewriting myth from the margins, her novels challenge what Michel Foucault (1980) describes as regimes of truth—systems through which power determines which narratives endure and which are silenced.

In reclaiming Tara, Urmila, and Surpanakha, Kane addresses Spivak's (1988) question, "Can the subaltern speak?" While epic tradition denies these women narrative authority, Kane's fiction enables them to speak through reimagined consciousness and voice.

Tara's Truce thus participates in a larger intellectual movement that treats myth not as sacred closure but as an open, dialogic discourse subject to ethical reevaluation. Myth becomes a living archive, continually reshaped by those previously excluded from its telling.

This study concludes that *Tara's Truce* represents a mature and sophisticated phase in Kavita Kane's feminist mythological project. Through Tara, Kane articulates a model of feminine power grounded in ethical reasoning, emotional intelligence, and political foresight rather than domination and violence.

When read comparatively with *Sita's Sister* and *Lanka's Princess*, *Tara's Truce* reveals a coherent feminist strategy: reclaiming marginal women to interrogate epic authority, patriarchal morality, and narrative silence. Kane's work ultimately transforms mythology into a democratic narrative space where suppressed voices reshape cultural memory. Her novels affirm that retelling myth is not an act of distortion but an ethical necessity, one that challenges

inherited power structures and restores narrative justice to those long excluded from epic history.

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