

Shattering the Veil: Rediscovering the Power of Forgotten Mythical Woman Tara in Kavitha Kane's *Tara's Truce*

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Abstract

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata have long been central to Indian cultural traditions, passed down through generations with countless retellings and interpretations. The Ramayana, with its captivating storyline and grand depiction of Ram, holds a revered place in the collective consciousness of the subcontinent. However, despite its focus on themes such as the conflict between powerful male figures, the victory of justice over injustice, obedience to parental authority, and the fulfilment of duty, the female characters have often been overlooked by the ancient storytellers.

Methodology: Qualitative research seeks to collect and analyse non-numeric data to understand an individual's social reality, including their attitudes, beliefs, and motivations. Information for the literature review is sourced from various materials, including educational websites, peer-reviewed journals, and online resources.

Findings and Result: This paper examines one such overlooked figure, Tara, the wife of the monkey king Vali and one of the Pancha-kanyas in Indian mythology. Drawing on various mainstream Ramayana versions, the paper highlights how male narrators have neglected Tara's story. Additionally, it explores how Kavitha Kane's recent novel *Tara's Truce* (2023) brings Tara into focus, offering a female perspective and giving her the attention, she has long been denied.

Keywords: *Ramayana, Tara, Myth, Womanhood, Feminism,*

1. INTRODUCTION

India has always been a land rich in legends and mysticism. Once in India, readers are drawn into a world of myth and magic. Myths are deeply influenced by cultural traditions, depicting gods in a way that helps individuals follow their spiritual paths, serving as a belief system for everyone. Myths play a role in daily life, often acting as symbols of truth. They are stories that reflect a society's challenges and beliefs, providing guidance in times of crisis. Myths don't have specific authors; instead, they are passed down through various literary adaptations. The word "myth" comes from the Greek word "muthos," meaning "word of mouth." Myths interpret and explore events in time and space, especially those from distant pasts, providing a unique understanding of reality. Like scientific knowledge, myths use cause and effect, though in a different way, to make sense of the world. Every origin story contains a fictional element. Myths are folktales that explain the beginnings of the world or a particular race and attempt to make sense of mysteries, supernatural events, and cultural traditions.

Myths are seen as direct expressions of the collective unconscious, according to Ira Progoff in "Jung's Psychology and Its Social Meaning" (Progoff 89). These stories, cherished and upheld by religious communities, reflect the values of the past. C. G. Jung, in the seventh volume of his *Collected Works*, describes the collective unconscious as the origin of myth, an expansive and unstructured imaginative realm within individuals where repressed and forgotten thoughts reside. These thoughts are termed "collective" because they are shaped by culture rather than individual experiences. Sigmund Freud, in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, revealed that human motivations stem from the irrational subconscious, which manifests itself in fantasies. In literature, the connection

between myth and storytelling takes various forms. Every society has a rich tradition of myths, and writers use these stories to address contemporary issues, expose societal flaws, and explore the mysteries of life and death. As Roland Barthes notes in **Mythologies**, myths provide historical events with natural explanations, making what is temporary seem eternal (Barthes 142).

2. BOOK SELECTED FOR STUDY

The book that has been selected for this paper is *Tara's Truce*.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

To examine various retellings in mythology, particularly focusing on the Ramayana.

To investigate the material concerning different retellings and comprehend their significance in today's world.

To delve into Tara's remarkable intelligence, foresight, and resolve; she is an exceptional stateswoman both before her marriage to Vali and after becoming the queen of Kishkindha.

4. METHODOLOGY

The researcher selected the "Exploratory Design" to investigate the issue at hand. As noted in the previous chapter, mythology has been studied for over a thousand years. This research specifically seeks to address the question of "how," meaning how mythology remains relevant despite its evolving forms. Qualitative research aims to understand a phenomenon, situation, or event by examining it in its entirety. A detailed examination of nearly all literary works in mythology, particularly the Ramayana and Mahabharata, facilitated an exploration of the ongoing retellings and reinterpretations by writers from around the globe.

5. OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN

Kavita Kane has emerged as a remarkable figure in the realm of myth retelling. In a society that often equates a woman's identity with her appearance and predefined gender roles, Kane's ability to distance herself from patriarchal biases while portraying characters who are victims of such oppression brings depth to the emotional struggles that define human suffering. Women's bodies are frequently objectified in socio-cultural contexts, with their worth tied to their appearance and sexual behaviour. While men in society are less defined by their bodies, women are often more closely associated with theirs. However, there is a significant difference between objectifying a woman and appreciating her beauty. Women should not be viewed as mere objects of utility, as they have far more to offer than their physical form, and they should not be devalued because of it. In her works, Kavita Kane focuses on female characters, striving to understand and convey the inner thoughts of women who face various social and cultural constraints.

The significance of women in the Hindu diaspora has been steadily increasing. However, women's independence within households and Indian society has gradually diminished over time, particularly from ancient times to the early Middle Ages. Pinpointing the exact moment in history when this decline began is challenging. By comparing ancient Indian civilizations, one can observe the shifting roles and status of women in society. Kavita Kane, intrigued by lesser-known and underappreciated female figures in mythology, turned her focus to writing books based on these mythological women.

Her character was shaped by the rich and diverse experiences she gained during her travels across India. These life experiences deeply influenced her mind and her writing. With a background in journalism, she developed an investigative approach that now informs her work, and she is a passionate admirer of cinema and theater. Her writings reflect these influences, sparking literary discussions about overlooked and marginalized figures in mythology. Her themes include abandoned female characters like Uruvi, marginalized protagonists like Urmila, the female body and sexual identity as battlegrounds for societal agendas (Menaka), and women like Surpanakha, punished for expressing their desires and heritage. Through her work, she captures the pain and suffering of a segment of society oppressed in the name of Hindu tradition and culture. Her writing seeks to create a space for both fiction and non-fiction in contemporary culture.

In her use of the popular genre of myth retelling, Kavita Kane accomplishes two objectives: she imbues the character of Uruvi with significant power while also unraveling the complex life of Karna for the audience. In the narrative, Uruvi reflects on key and critical issues related to Karna's life, while other characters recount Uruvi's story to the reader. The novel provides a platform for those marginalized on the fringes of traditional narratives, raising important questions that demand attention, as they can no longer remain unaddressed. Uruvi serves as both the voice of the author and the audience, revealing unresolved questions on behalf of the readers. The work delves into the deepest desires and inner conflicts of the epic heroes from the **Mahabharata**. Throughout the story, characters like Bhanumati and Uruvi act on behalf of Gandhari and Draupadi, both of whom harbour suppressed anger and resentment towards their own families and relatives.

6. THE DIVINE MAIDENS: ICONS OF VIRTUE AND COMPLEXITY IN HINDU EPICS

In Hindu mythology, the Panchakanyas, meaning "five virgins" or "five maidens," are a revered group of five women known for their virtues, strength, and significance in ancient epics. Despite the complexities and challenges they faced, they are remembered for their purity and grace, and the recitation of their names is believed to absolve sins. These women are often invoked in the context of spiritual purification, despite their involvement in morally ambiguous situations. The traditional Panchakanyas include:

1. Ahalya

Ahalya, considered one of the most beautiful women in mythology, was the wife of Sage Gautama. She was deceived by Indra, the king of gods, who disguised himself as her husband to seduce her. Upon learning of the betrayal, her husband cursed her, either turning her into stone or exiling her to the forest. She was later redeemed and purified by Lord Rama. Despite the complexity of her circumstances, Ahalya symbolizes purity, and her story emphasizes the themes of forgiveness and transformation.

2. Draupadi

Draupadi is one of the central figures in the *Mahabharata*. Married to the five Pandava brothers, she is known for her intelligence, devotion, and fiery spirit. Draupadi played a pivotal role in the Pandavas' journey and their eventual victory in the Kurukshetra war. She is celebrated for her unwavering sense of justice, dignity, and strength, standing firm even in the face of extreme humiliation and hardship.

3. Kunti

Kunti, another key figure from the *Mahabharata*, was the mother of the Pandavas. Blessed with a divine boon, she had the power to invoke any god to bear a child. Before her marriage, she invoked Surya, the sun god, and gave birth to Karna. Despite the rigid societal norms, Kunti is remembered as a figure of immense strength, devotion, and sacrifice. She raised her children under challenging circumstances, guiding them with wisdom as they fought for justice.

4. Tara

Tara, featured in the *Ramayana*, was the wife of the monkey king Vali, and later his brother Sugriva. Renowned for her wisdom and political insight, Tara played a critical role in the politics of the monkey kingdom during the conflict between Vali and Sugriva. Her intelligence, diplomacy, and ability to navigate difficult situations make her a respected figure in the epic.

5. Mandodari

Mandodari, the wife of Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, is also featured in the *Ramayana*. Despite being married to Ravana, she is remembered for her virtue, grace, and loyalty. Mandodari urged Ravana to return Sita to Lord Rama to avoid destruction, but her wise counsel was ignored. Her role is often seen as tragic, as she remained loyal to her husband despite his misdeeds, symbolizing wisdom and devotion.

Significance of the Panchakanyas Reciting the names of the Panchakanyas—Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, and Mandodari—is believed to offer spiritual benefits, including the cleansing of sins. Though these women faced morally ambiguous situations and often suffered due to societal constraints or the actions of men, they each displayed exceptional resilience, wisdom, and moral strength. The Panchakanyas represent a complex combination of virtue, devotion, and personal strength, transcending the traditional roles assigned to women in the patriarchal narratives of ancient times. They serve as a reminder that even in the midst of adversity and moral complexity, individuals can rise to spiritual purity and strength.

6. KAVITHA KANE'S *TARA'S TRUCE*

In the realm of revisionist mythmaking within Indian culture, Kavita Kane has emerged as a prominent figure. To date, she has published eight novels, each centered around mythological women such as Uruvi, Urmila, Menaka, Surpanakha, Satyawati, Ahalya, Saraswati, and Tara. Her works have garnered widespread popularity among readers. *Tara's Truce*, published in 2023, is her most recent literary endeavour. In this novel, Kane portrays Tara as a courageous and empowered woman whose profound wisdom not only leaves a lasting impact on the other characters but also saves her kingdom from ruin. This paper uses *Tara's Truce* as its primary source to examine how Kane offers an alternative perspective on Tara, highlighting her overlooked attributes and giving her a newfound significance in Indian mythology.

Tara, one of the revered Panchakanyas in Indian mythology, has traditionally been overlooked by many storytellers and re-tellers of the Ramayana. Scholarly analysis of her character has also been limited. However, Tara's case is not unique; many female figures in epic narratives have suffered similar neglect and marginalization. As an example, in the paper "Exploring Shanta Myth through the Trajectory of Feminism," the following is noted:

"As we live in a patriarchal society, there have been numerous instances where the actions of certain male characters from the epics are exaggerated to capture the reader's attention. Aside from promoting misogynistic ideals about female chastity and Stree dharma, female characters are largely ignored. Some of these women, despite being used by narrators to serve the interests of the male characters, are rendered invisible to the point that readers are often unaware of their existence." (De 98)

Challenging this trend, Kane's latest novel focuses on a previously neglected figure, Tara, exploring the unexamined aspects of her personality. Before delving into an in-depth discussion of the novel, however, it is important to examine how Tara has been portrayed by mainstream mythmakers. Tara, initially married to Vali and later to Sugriva after Vali's death, makes a brief appearance in the Kishkindha Kanda of the Ramayana. Valmiki offers a detailed account of Tara's grief and despair following Vali's death, illustrating her feelings of helplessness and vulnerability as a widow. However, Valmiki also hints that the subsequent union between Tara and Sugriva after their marriage marks a shift in their relationship. It is suggested that Sugriva's obsession with Tara's beauty caused him to neglect his other responsibilities.

In Tulsidas' version, Ram consoles the mourning Tara, offering her wisdom about the fleeting nature of mortal life and reminding her of the transient nature of worldly attachments (724). In the Giradhara Ramayana, Tara expresses her anger toward Ram, pleading for her own death, saying, "you have made me a widow, removing all the signs of a chaste married lady" (Giradhara 178). The Kritibasi Ramayana portrays Tara in an even fiercer light. She not only blames Ram for his actions but also curses him, stating that he will never be able to live happily with Sita.

Additionally, in the Kritibasi Ramayana, Tara curses Ram, predicting that due to his negative karma, he will be killed by Vali in his next life. Renowned mythologist Pradip Bhattacharya notes: "In Kritibas' Bengali Ramayana, Tara curses Rama to be slain by Vali in a future birth. This is corroborated by the Mahabharata and the Ananda Ramayana, which state that the hunter responsible for Krishna's death is a reborn Vali. In various regional adaptations of the epic, Tara also curses Rama, declaring that he will not be able to enjoy Sita's company for long." (28)

Another important aspect to consider is that in most versions of the Ramayana, Tara is initially married to Vali, and after his death, she marries his younger brother Sugriva, in accordance with her clan's customs. However, some sources suggest a polyandrous relationship involving Tara and the two brothers. According to Wikipedia: "While the Ramayana indicates that Tara first marries Vali, some adaptations propose a polyandrous relationship between Tara, Vali, and Sugriva. The Ranganatha Ramayana states that Tara is given to both Vali and Sugriva as a reward for aiding the gods. A Tamil folk tale narrates that after the emergence of amrita, Tara rises and is designated as a common wife for both Vali and Sugriva." (web)

In stark contrast to this, Kane portrays Tara as entirely devoted to Vali. From the outset of her novel, Vali and Tara share a mutual attraction, having been childhood friends and lovers. Their dreams extend beyond a happy family; they also aspire to dedicate their lives to the welfare of their tribe. Kane's depiction of Tara is that of an educated, dignified, and wise woman whose concerns extend beyond herself and her relationship with Vali. She is deeply invested in the plight of her tribe, which faces oppression and marginalization from other social groups. During her discussions with Vali, she proudly asserts that their tribe is just as cultured as the so-called elite communities. It is possible that members of other social groups fail to appreciate their cultural ethos or ridicule them for their unique skills, such as tree climbing. However, such mockery ultimately reflects a limitation in the perspective of those who deride them.

Kane illuminates Tara's childhood and illustrates her evolution into a healer and a compassionate individual. When Tara was just four years old, her mother passed away during childbirth while delivering her younger sibling. The traumatic experience of witnessing blood, screams, and suffering left a lasting impression on her mind. As she matured, she pursued a career as a healer. In reflecting on her mother's death, Tara emphasizes the importance of women's reproductive health and childbirth, characterizing childbirth as a type of warfare. While heroic ballads are composed in honor of fallen male warriors, the stories of women who die during childbirth are often forgotten. "There's no glory, no heroism in such a death. It's so usual, just data and digits, and life goes on as normally as death" (Kane 35). Furthermore, Tara envisions that if she ever has a daughter, she will grow up to be fearless and independent, avoiding financial reliance on her husband or any male figure, and will learn to succeed through her own abilities.

In her novel, Kane recounts the tale of Tara, the wife of Rishi Brihaspati, who falls in love with Chandra, the personification of the moon. Despite her affection for Chandra, societal expectations force her to suppress her desires and return to her husband. Kane seeks to draw parallels between the two Taras, suggesting that the protagonist of **Tara's Truce** similarly becomes the catalyst for conflict between two brothers. From the outset of the novel, Kane indicates that both Vali and Sugriva are drawn to Tara. However, Tara only has romantic feelings

for Vali, viewing Sugriv as a brother and friend. Upon discovering the secret of Tara's relationship with Vali, Sugriv experiences deep emotional turmoil, leading to a rift between him and Vali. Even after marrying Ruma, Sugriv's resentment toward Vali and his overwhelming love for Tara persist. Despite Tara's repeated attempts to mend the rift between the brothers, she continually fails. Even when Sugriv's wife Ruma confides in Tara about her unhappy marriage, Tara is unable to bring joy to their relationship. Nevertheless, Tara's remarkable selflessness is evident when she entrusts Ruma with the care of Angad, her only son, as Ruma is unable to have children. This act offers Ruma a sense of purpose and fulfillment in her life.

Tara serves as Vali's guiding light, motivating him to uncover his hidden potential and dedicate himself to improving their community. "You promised to give us a better future—so give it" (Kane 73). Additionally, she refuses to remain in her husband's shadow, instead choosing to devote herself to the education and care of orphaned children, thereby finding fulfillment in helping others. While Tara takes pride in Vali's achievements, she is also unafraid to criticize his mistakes. When Vali begins to exhibit tyrannical behavior, Tara attempts to steer him back toward righteousness and moral integrity, striving to revive his commitment to virtue and ethical conduct. She questions him, "Have you taken half of Ravan's power only to become a different person? Are you like him now—thirsting for blood and violence in the name of power, glory, and honour?" (Kane 158).

Despite Tara's continuous warnings, Vali decides to fight a demon named Dundubhi. When parts of Dundubhi's corpse land in the hermitage of the sage Matang, the enraged sage curses Vali, declaring that he will die if he approaches the hermitage or its vicinity. This curse acts as the trigger for Vali's eventual downfall. Rather than amend his behavior, Vali escalates his sinful actions by brutally killing people, exiling his brother Sugriv, and imprisoning Sugriv's wife, Ruma. Upon learning of Ravan's abduction of Sita, Tara confronts Vali, asserting that he is a criminal akin to Ravan since he has exiled his brother and held his brother's wife captive against her will. When Sugriv challenges Vali to a duel, Tara, utilizing her sharp insight and intuition, suspects that Sugriv has allied with a powerful force; otherwise, he wouldn't be so bold as to confront Vali. However, ignoring Tara's caution, Vali proceeds with the duel, and as planned, Ram, concealed in nearby bushes, fatally wounds Vali with an arrow. This event is recounted in nearly all mainstream versions of the Ramayana.

In *Tara's Truce*, Kane emphasizes Tara's selflessness. Even after receiving the heart-breaking news of her beloved husband's death, Tara manages her emotions and places the welfare of her subjects above her own feelings. Addressing her people, she reassures them, saying, "The king is dying . . . But that does not mean you are orphaned. You are safe" (Kane 243). However, Tara strongly criticizes Ram's moral principles, denouncing his interference in others' familial conflicts and his act of shooting an unarmed Vali from his hidden position. She asserts, "You committed a dishonourable deed, Ram—more dishonourable than the death you bestowed upon Vali! Because you killed Vali while hiding behind a tree, because you shot an arrow at an unarmed, vulnerable person, may you all be killed the same way—helpless and defenceless" (Kane 252). She labels both Ram and Sugriv as cowards, stating, "You robbed him of a hero's death he deserved, instead killing him by treachery" (Kane 248). Tara condemns Ram's morally dubious act of slaying Vali and places a curse upon him. First, she proclaims that just as he killed Vali when he was defenseless, Ram will also face a similar fate. Second, although Ram will succeed in rescuing Sita from Ravan, he will never find happiness with her; she will ultimately leave him and return to Mother Earth forever. It appears that Kane has drawn inspiration from the Krittibasi Ramayana in this depiction and reimagined the incident.

In her conversation with Lakshman, Kane's Tara highlights that although Lakshman has made significant sacrifices for his brother, he has failed to take a stand against Sugriv's betrayal of their elder brother Vali, despite being fully aware of it. When Lakshman labels Vali as characterless for keeping Sugriv's wife Ruma in his harem, Tara counters that although Vali imprisoned Ruma, he never disrespected her or considered molesting her. In contrast, Sugriv has harbored romantic feelings for Tara from the start, and it is his base desire to possess her that led him to commit such a despicable act. Additionally, Tara does not shy away from calling out Lakshman's misogynistic views. On another occasion, when Hanuman praises Lakshman for his respectful demeanor toward women, Tara responds with sarcasm, remarking, "try telling Ravan's nose-less sister that!" (Kane 271).

In Kishkindhian society, it is a common practice for the younger brother to marry the widow of his deceased elder brother. Following this tradition, Tara reluctantly agrees to marry Sugriv, reminiscent of another character in the Ramayana, Mandodari, who married her brother-in-law Vibhishana after the death of her husband, Ravan, for similar reasons. Tara understands that her marriage to Sugriv is essential for maintaining peace and stability in the kingdom and preventing any possible rebellion among the subjects. In this way, she sacrifices her own well-being to protect the kingdom. By doing so, she also secures her political rights as queen and ensures her son Angada's future claim to the throne of Kishkindha. Tara recognizes that Sugriv lacks the ability to govern effectively. Consequently, she feels it is crucial for her to retain the power and authority of the queen in order to

address the welfare and concerns of the people. However, she makes it clear to Sugriv that her acceptance of this union is solely for political reasons, indicating that there will be no marital relationship between them. As Ruma states:

From this point onward, Sugriv becomes merely a symbolic king, while Tara emerges as the true authority of Kishkindha, recognized and respected by all. It is primarily Jambavan and Hanuman with whom Ram and Lakshman consult, and they should acknowledge that much of the wisdom they gather originates from Tara's intellect (Kane 267). In analyzing Tara's character, Devdutt Pattanaik insightfully remarks: "Tara appears as a negotiator and peacemaker, demonstrating capabilities that Sugriv lacks. Her beauty and intelligence elevate her, giving rise to the folklore that she was churned from the ocean of milk by the gods. She is no ordinary vanara" (183).

Kane's portrayal of Tara is that of a politically astute, intelligent, and perceptive individual. She openly criticizes Sugriv for forming an alliance with Ram, stating that by aligning with Ram to facilitate Vali's murder, Sugriv has set his own kingdom on a path toward destruction. She warns Sugriv, "Do you understand how many Vanaras will perish because of your selfish desire to eliminate Vali?" (Kane 288). When Sugriv neglects his pledge to Ram and indulges in luxury rather than aiding in Sita's rescue, Ram sends Lakshmana to Kishkindha to correct Sugriv's behavior. Tara meets Lakshmana and reassures him that they will do everything possible to rescue Sita, thereby shielding Sugriv from Lakshmana's wrath. This event is referenced in numerous mainstream sources, including the Mahabharata. Pradip Bhattacharya, in his influential work *Pancha-kanya: Indian Epics' Five Virgins*, notes: "In the Mahabharata, there's an intriguing statement indicating that Vali and Sugriv fought over a woman. This woman was undoubtedly the extraordinary Tara, as Sugriv, upon hearing of Lakshmana's arrival, is so captivated by Tara that he becomes oblivious to the news regarding his first wife, Ruma. This notion is further supported in the Valinese dance (Kebyar)" (30).

However, in *Tara's Truce*, Tara does not permit Sugriv to establish any close physical relationship with her, even after their marriage. She remains devoted solely to her late husband, Vali, and is not the cause of Sugriv's distractions. Nonetheless, as Sugriv indulges in worldly pleasures, prompting Lakshman's anger due to his insincerity and ingratitude, Tara steps in to pacify Lakshman. Kane reimagines this scene from traditional narratives in her distinctive style. Tara's intellect, wisdom, foresight, and kind words remind Lakshmana of his mother, Sumitra. Lakshmana acknowledges her with respect, saying: "You remind me of my mother... just as graceful, with a hint of sadness in her calm eyes; just as wise, making decisions, guiding people quietly and firmly" (Kane 282).

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this analysis demonstrates that a thorough examination of traditional sources alongside Kane's novel *Tara's Truce* reveals a stark contrast between the conventional depiction of Tara as a passive character and Kane's portrayal of her as an empowered and politically astute woman. The exploration of themes such as Tara's selflessness, intelligence, and her critiques of patriarchal norms highlights the alternative perspective Kane offers. As a result, this paper contributes to a larger discourse on gender representation within mythology and underscores the importance of feminist retellings in transforming cultural narratives.

Kane's portrayal of Tara presents her as a self-sufficient and assertive individual, directly challenging traditional gender roles and societal expectations, thus illustrating women's strength in defiance of these norms. Adopting a feminist lens when examining mythological figures creates a more nuanced understanding of these well-known characters, prompting audiences to re-evaluate established narratives that often overlook women's emotional needs and sense of identity due to societal neglect. Kane confronts patriarchal ideologies head-on, reimagining them through the experiences of marginalized women while honoring divine femininity as depicted in their struggles. This approach reveals the hidden challenges and messages that advocate for female empowerment, all while acknowledging the societal expectations intricately woven into these narratives.

The article significantly enriches current understanding of the subject by discussing how women have demonstrated empowerment and resilience throughout mythologies. It suggests a need for a re-evaluation of how we perceive women's roles in both historical and contemporary contexts. By encouraging a reassessment of women's agency and determination within mythological adaptations, the article urges readers to reflect on women's positions in historical accounts and modern societies. By investigating the themes of female empowerment and resilience found within myths, it emphasizes that these narratives illuminate critical societal expectations placed on women and highlight the conventional stories that merit re-evaluation.

8. SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

This research examines specific aspects of how mythological retellings are presented and why the core of the

original narratives remains preserved. However, there are more urgent issues that warrant further investigation. Does the renewed interest in mythology, whether through fictionalization or interpretation, reflect a growing sense of pride in cultural heritage? Could this interest lead to religious and caste-based politics? Will these Hindu retellings contribute to increasing political tensions? While previous studies in mythology have been extensive, there has been limited focus on how and why these stories are revisited and continually appreciated. Much of the existing research is influenced by literary, humanitarian, and feminist frameworks, yet none address why the essence of these stories endures in the minds and hearts of readers. This research aims to explore these questions through a content analysis of the book *Tara's Truce* by Kavitha Kane.

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7. INTRODUCTION

India has always been a land rich in legends and mysticism. Once in India, readers are drawn into a world of myth and magic. Myths are deeply influenced by cultural traditions, depicting gods in a way that helps individuals follow their spiritual paths, serving as a belief system for everyone. Myths play a role in daily life, often acting as symbols of truth. They are stories that reflect a society's challenges and beliefs, providing guidance in times of crisis. Myths don't have specific authors; instead, they are passed down through various literary adaptations. The word "myth" comes from the Greek word "muthos," meaning "word of mouth." Myths interpret and explore events in time and space, especially those from distant pasts, providing a unique understanding of reality. Like scientific knowledge, myths use cause and effect, though in a different way, to make sense of the world. Every origin story contains a fictional element. Myths are folktales that explain the beginnings of the world or a particular race and attempt to make sense of mysteries, supernatural events, and cultural traditions.

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The book that has been selected for this paper is *Tara's Truce*.

9. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

To examine various retellings in mythology, particularly focusing on the Ramayana.

To investigate the material concerning different retellings and comprehend their significance in today's world.

To delve into Tara's remarkable intelligence, foresight, and resolve; she is an exceptional stateswoman both before her marriage to Vali and after becoming the queen of Kishkindha.

10. METHODOLOGY

The researcher selected the "Exploratory Design" to investigate the issue at hand. As noted in the previous chapter, mythology has been studied for over a thousand years. This research specifically seeks to address the question of "how," meaning how mythology remains relevant despite its evolving forms. Qualitative research aims to understand a phenomenon, situation, or event by examining it in its entirety. A detailed examination of nearly all literary works in mythology, particularly the Ramayana and Mahabharata, facilitated an exploration of the ongoing retellings and reinterpretations by writers from around the globe.

11. OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN

Kavita Kane has emerged as a remarkable figure in the realm of myth retelling. In a society that often equates a woman's identity with her appearance and predefined gender roles, Kane's ability to distance herself from patriarchal biases while portraying characters who are victims of such oppression brings depth to the emotional struggles that define human suffering. Women's bodies are frequently objectified in socio-cultural contexts, with their worth tied to their appearance and sexual behaviour. While men in society are less defined by their bodies, women are often more closely associated with theirs. However, there is a significant difference between objectifying a woman and appreciating her beauty. Women should not be viewed as mere objects of utility, as they have far more to offer than their physical form, and they should not be devalued because of it. In her works, Kavita Kane focuses on female characters, striving to understand and convey the inner thoughts of women who face various social and cultural constraints.

The significance of women in the Hindu diaspora has been steadily increasing. However, women's independence within households and Indian society has gradually diminished over time, particularly from ancient times to the early Middle Ages. Pinpointing the exact moment in history when this decline began is challenging. By comparing ancient Indian civilizations, one can observe the shifting roles and status of women in society. Kavita Kane, intrigued by lesser-known and underappreciated female figures in mythology, turned her focus to writing books based on these mythological women.

Her character was shaped by the rich and diverse experiences she gained during her travels across India. These life experiences deeply influenced her mind and her writing. With a background in journalism, she developed an investigative approach that now informs her work, and she is a passionate admirer of cinema and theater. Her writings reflect these influences, sparking literary discussions about overlooked and marginalized figures in mythology. Her themes include abandoned female characters like Uruvi, marginalized protagonists like Urmila, the female body and sexual identity as battlegrounds for societal agendas (Menaka), and women like Surpanakha, punished for expressing their desires and heritage. Through her work, she captures the pain and suffering of a segment of society oppressed in the name of Hindu tradition and culture. Her writing seeks to create a space for both fiction and non-fiction in contemporary culture.

In her use of the popular genre of myth retelling, Kavita Kane accomplishes two objectives: she imbues the character of Uruvi with significant power while also unraveling the complex life of Karna for the audience. In the narrative, Uruvi reflects on key and critical issues related to Karna's life, while other characters recount Uruvi's story to the reader. The novel provides a platform for those marginalized on the fringes of traditional narratives, raising important questions that demand attention, as they can no longer remain unaddressed. Uruvi serves as both the voice of the author and the audience, revealing unresolved questions on behalf of the readers. The work delves into the deepest desires and inner conflicts of the epic heroes from the *Mahabharata*. Throughout the story, characters like Bhanumati and Uruvi act on behalf of Gandhari and Draupadi, both of whom harbour suppressed anger and resentment towards their own families and relatives.

12. THE DIVINE MAIDENS: ICONS OF VIRTUE AND COMPLEXITY IN HINDU EPICS

In Hindu mythology, the Panchakanyas, meaning "five virgins" or "five maidens," are a revered group of five

women known for their virtues, strength, and significance in ancient epics. Despite the complexities and challenges they faced, they are remembered for their purity and grace, and the recitation of their names is believed to absolve sins. These women are often invoked in the context of spiritual purification, despite their involvement in morally ambiguous situations. The traditional Panchakanyas include:

10. Ahalya

Ahalya, considered one of the most beautiful women in mythology, was the wife of Sage Gautama. She was deceived by Indra, the king of gods, who disguised himself as her husband to seduce her. Upon learning of the betrayal, her husband cursed her, either turning her into stone or exiling her to the forest. She was later redeemed and purified by Lord Rama. Despite the complexity of her circumstances, Ahalya symbolizes purity, and her story emphasizes the themes of forgiveness and transformation.

11. Draupadi

Draupadi is one of the central figures in the *Mahabharata*. Married to the five Pandava brothers, she is known for her intelligence, devotion, and fiery spirit. Draupadi played a pivotal role in the Pandavas' journey and their eventual victory in the Kurukshetra war. She is celebrated for her unwavering sense of justice, dignity, and strength, standing firm even in the face of extreme humiliation and hardship.

12. Kunti

Kunti, another key figure from the *Mahabharata*, was the mother of the Pandavas. Blessed with a divine boon, she had the power to invoke any god to bear a child. Before her marriage, she invoked Surya, the sun god, and gave birth to Karna. Despite the rigid societal norms, Kunti is remembered as a figure of immense strength, devotion, and sacrifice. She raised her children under challenging circumstances, guiding them with wisdom as they fought for justice.

13. Tara

Tara, featured in the *Ramayana*, was the wife of the monkey king Vali, and later his brother Sugriva. Renowned for her wisdom and political insight, Tara played a critical role in the politics of the monkey kingdom during the conflict between Vali and Sugriva. Her intelligence, diplomacy, and ability to navigate difficult situations make her a respected figure in the epic.

14. Mandodari

Mandodari, the wife of Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, is also featured in the *Ramayana*. Despite being married to Ravana, she is remembered for her virtue, grace, and loyalty. Mandodari urged Ravana to return Sita to Lord Rama to avoid destruction, but her wise counsel was ignored. Her role is often seen as tragic, as she remained loyal to her husband despite his misdeeds, symbolizing wisdom and devotion.

Significance of the Panchakanyas Reciting the names of the Panchakanyas—Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, and Mandodari—is believed to offer spiritual benefits, including the cleansing of sins. Though these women faced morally ambiguous situations and often suffered due to societal constraints or the actions of men, they each displayed exceptional resilience, wisdom, and moral strength. The Panchakanyas represent a complex combination of virtue, devotion, and personal strength, transcending the traditional roles assigned to women in the patriarchal narratives of ancient times. They serve as a reminder that even in the midst of adversity and moral complexity, individuals can rise to spiritual purity and strength.

15. KAVITHA KANE'S *TARA'S TRUCE*

In the realm of revisionist mythmaking within Indian culture, Kavita Kane has emerged as a prominent figure. To date, she has published eight novels, each centered around mythological women such as Uruvi, Urmila, Menaka, Surpanakha, Satyawati, Ahalya, Saraswati, and Tara. Her works have garnered widespread popularity among readers. *Tara's Truce*, published in 2023, is her most recent literary endeavour. In this novel, Kane portrays Tara as a courageous and empowered woman whose profound wisdom not only leaves a lasting impact on the other characters but also saves her kingdom from ruin. This paper uses *Tara's Truce* as its primary source to examine how Kane offers an alternative perspective on Tara, highlighting her overlooked attributes and giving her a newfound significance in Indian mythology.

Tara, one of the revered Panchakanyas in Indian mythology, has traditionally been overlooked by many storytellers and re-tellers of the Ramayana. Scholarly analysis of her character has also been limited. However, Tara's case is not unique; many female figures in epic narratives have suffered similar neglect and marginalization. As an example, in the paper "Exploring Shanta Myth through the Trajectory of Feminism," the following is noted: "As we live in a patriarchal society, there have been numerous instances where the actions of certain male characters from the epics are exaggerated to capture the reader's attention. Aside from promoting misogynistic ideals about female chastity and Stree dharma, female characters are largely ignored. Some of these women,

despite being used by narrators to serve the interests of the male characters, are rendered invisible to the point that readers are often unaware of their existence." (De 98)

Challenging this trend, Kane's latest novel focuses on a previously neglected figure, Tara, exploring the unexamined aspects of her personality. Before delving into an in-depth discussion of the novel, however, it is important to examine how Tara has been portrayed by mainstream mythmakers. Tara, initially married to Vali and later to Sugriva after Vali's death, makes a brief appearance in the Kishkindha Kanda of the Ramayana. Valmiki offers a detailed account of Tara's grief and despair following Vali's death, illustrating her feelings of helplessness and vulnerability as a widow. However, Valmiki also hints that the subsequent union between Tara and Sugriva after their marriage marks a shift in their relationship. It is suggested that Sugriva's obsession with Tara's beauty caused him to neglect his other responsibilities.

In Tulsidas' version, Ram consoles the mourning Tara, offering her wisdom about the fleeting nature of mortal life and reminding her of the transient nature of worldly attachments (724). In the Giradhara Ramayana, Tara expresses her anger toward Ram, pleading for her own death, saying, "you have made me a widow, removing all the signs of a chaste married lady" (Giradhara 178). The Krittibasi Ramayana portrays Tara in an even fiercer light. She not only blames Ram for his actions but also curses him, stating that he will never be able to live happily with Sita.

Additionally, in the Krittibasi Ramayana, Tara curses Ram, predicting that due to his negative karma, he will be killed by Vali in his next life. Renowned mythologist Pradip Bhattacharya notes: "In Krittibas' Bengali Ramayana, Tara curses Rama to be slain by Vali in a future birth. This is corroborated by the Mahabharata and the Ananda Ramayana, which state that the hunter responsible for Krishna's death is a reborn Vali. In various regional adaptations of the epic, Tara also curses Rama, declaring that he will not be able to enjoy Sita's company for long." (28)

Another important aspect to consider is that in most versions of the Ramayana, Tara is initially married to Vali, and after his death, she marries his younger brother Sugriva, in accordance with her clan's customs. However, some sources suggest a polyandrous relationship involving Tara and the two brothers. According to Wikipedia: "While the Ramayana indicates that Tara first marries Vali, some adaptations propose a polyandrous relationship between Tara, Vali, and Sugriva. The Ranganatha Ramayana states that Tara is given to both Vali and Sugriva as a reward for aiding the gods. A Tamil folk tale narrates that after the emergence of amrita, Tara rises and is designated as a common wife for both Vali and Sugriva." (web)

In stark contrast to this, Kane portrays Tara as entirely devoted to Vali. From the outset of her novel, Vali and Tara share a mutual attraction, having been childhood friends and lovers. Their dreams extend beyond a happy family; they also aspire to dedicate their lives to the welfare of their tribe. Kane's depiction of Tara is that of an educated, dignified, and wise woman whose concerns extend beyond herself and her relationship with Vali. She is deeply invested in the plight of her tribe, which faces oppression and marginalization from other social groups. During her discussions with Vali, she proudly asserts that their tribe is just as cultured as the so-called elite communities. It is possible that members of other social groups fail to appreciate their cultural ethos or ridicule them for their unique skills, such as tree climbing. However, such mockery ultimately reflects a limitation in the perspective of those who deride them.

Kane illuminates Tara's childhood and illustrates her evolution into a healer and a compassionate individual. When Tara was just four years old, her mother passed away during childbirth while delivering her younger sibling. The traumatic experience of witnessing blood, screams, and suffering left a lasting impression on her mind. As she matured, she pursued a career as a healer. In reflecting on her mother's death, Tara emphasizes the importance of women's reproductive health and childbirth, characterizing childbirth as a type of warfare. While heroic ballads are composed in honor of fallen male warriors, the stories of women who die during childbirth are often forgotten. "There's no glory, no heroism in such a death. It's so usual, just data and digits, and life goes on as normally as death" (Kane 35). Furthermore, Tara envisions that if she ever has a daughter, she will grow up to be fearless and independent, avoiding financial reliance on her husband or any male figure, and will learn to succeed through her own abilities.

In her novel, Kane recounts the tale of Tara, the wife of Rishi Brihaspati, who falls in love with Chandra, the personification of the moon. Despite her affection for Chandra, societal expectations force her to suppress her desires and return to her husband. Kane seeks to draw parallels between the two Taras, suggesting that the protagonist of **Tara's Truce** similarly becomes the catalyst for conflict between two brothers. From the outset of the novel, Kane indicates that both Vali and Sugriva are drawn to Tara. However, Tara only has romantic feelings for Vali, viewing Sugriva as a brother and friend. Upon discovering the secret of Tara's relationship with Vali, Sugriva experiences deep emotional turmoil, leading to a rift between him and Vali. Even after marrying Ruma, Sugriva's resentment toward Vali and his overwhelming love for Tara persist. Despite Tara's repeated attempts to

mend the rift between the brothers, she continually fails. Even when Sugriv's wife Ruma confides in Tara about her unhappy marriage, Tara is unable to bring joy to their relationship. Nevertheless, Tara's remarkable selflessness is evident when she entrusts Ruma with the care of Angad, her only son, as Ruma is unable to have children. This act offers Ruma a sense of purpose and fulfillment in her life.

Tara serves as Vali's guiding light, motivating him to uncover his hidden potential and dedicate himself to improving their community. "You promised to give us a better future—so give it" (Kane 73). Additionally, she refuses to remain in her husband's shadow, instead choosing to devote herself to the education and care of orphaned children, thereby finding fulfillment in helping others. While Tara takes pride in Vali's achievements, she is also unafraid to criticize his mistakes. When Vali begins to exhibit tyrannical behavior, Tara attempts to steer him back toward righteousness and moral integrity, striving to revive his commitment to virtue and ethical conduct. She questions him, "Have you taken half of Ravan's power only to become a different person? Are you like him now—thirsting for blood and violence in the name of power, glory, and honour?" (Kane 158).

Despite Tara's continuous warnings, Vali decides to fight a demon named Dundubhi. When parts of Dundubhi's corpse land in the hermitage of the sage Matang, the enraged sage curses Vali, declaring that he will die if he approaches the hermitage or its vicinity. This curse acts as the trigger for Vali's eventual downfall. Rather than amend his behavior, Vali escalates his sinful actions by brutally killing people, exiling his brother Sugriv, and imprisoning Sugriv's wife, Ruma. Upon learning of Ravan's abduction of Sita, Tara confronts Vali, asserting that he is a criminal akin to Ravan since he has exiled his brother and held his brother's wife captive against her will. When Sugriv challenges Vali to a duel, Tara, utilizing her sharp insight and intuition, suspects that Sugriv has allied with a powerful force; otherwise, he wouldn't be so bold as to confront Vali. However, ignoring Tara's caution, Vali proceeds with the duel, and as planned, Ram, concealed in nearby bushes, fatally wounds Vali with an arrow. This event is recounted in nearly all mainstream versions of the Ramayana.

In *Tara's Truce*, Kane emphasizes Tara's selflessness. Even after receiving the heart-breaking news of her beloved husband's death, Tara manages her emotions and places the welfare of her subjects above her own feelings. Addressing her people, she reassures them, saying, "The king is dying . . . But that does not mean you are orphaned. You are safe" (Kane 243). However, Tara strongly criticizes Ram's moral principles, denouncing his interference in others' familial conflicts and his act of shooting an unarmed Vali from his hidden position. She asserts, "You committed a dishonourable deed, Ram—more dishonourable than the death you bestowed upon Vali! Because you killed Vali while hiding behind a tree, because you shot an arrow at an unarmed, vulnerable person, may you all be killed the same way—helpless and defenceless" (Kane 252). She labels both Ram and Sugriv as cowards, stating, "You robbed him of a hero's death he deserved, instead killing him by treachery" (Kane 248). Tara condemns Ram's morally dubious act of slaying Vali and places a curse upon him. First, she proclaims that just as he killed Vali when he was defenseless, Ram will also face a similar fate. Second, although Ram will succeed in rescuing Sita from Ravan, he will never find happiness with her; she will ultimately leave him and return to Mother Earth forever. It appears that Kane has drawn inspiration from the Krittibasi Ramayana in this depiction and reimagined the incident.

In her conversation with Lakshman, Kane's Tara highlights that although Lakshman has made significant sacrifices for his brother, he has failed to take a stand against Sugriv's betrayal of their elder brother Vali, despite being fully aware of it. When Lakshman labels Vali as characterless for keeping Sugriv's wife Ruma in his harem, Tara counters that although Vali imprisoned Ruma, he never disrespected her or considered molesting her. In contrast, Sugriv has harbored romantic feelings for Tara from the start, and it is his base desire to possess her that led him to commit such a despicable act. Additionally, Tara does not shy away from calling out Lakshman's misogynistic views. On another occasion, when Hanuman praises Lakshman for his respectful demeanor toward women, Tara responds with sarcasm, remarking, "try telling Ravan's nose-less sister that!" (Kane 271).

In Kishkindhian society, it is a common practice for the younger brother to marry the widow of his deceased elder brother. Following this tradition, Tara reluctantly agrees to marry Sugriv, reminiscent of another character in the Ramayana, Mandodari, who married her brother-in-law Vibhishana after the death of her husband, Ravan, for similar reasons. Tara understands that her marriage to Sugriv is essential for maintaining peace and stability in the kingdom and preventing any possible rebellion among the subjects. In this way, she sacrifices her own well-being to protect the kingdom. By doing so, she also secures her political rights as queen and ensures her son Angada's future claim to the throne of Kishkindha. Tara recognizes that Sugriv lacks the ability to govern effectively. Consequently, she feels it is crucial for her to retain the power and authority of the queen in order to address the welfare and concerns of the people. However, she makes it clear to Sugriv that her acceptance of this union is solely for political reasons, indicating that there will be no marital relationship between them. As Ruma states:

From this point onward, Sugriv becomes merely a symbolic king, while Tara emerges as the true authority of Kishkindha, recognized and respected by all. It is primarily Jambavan and Hanuman with whom Ram and Lakshman consult, and they should acknowledge that much of the wisdom they gather originates from Tara's intellect (Kane 267). In analyzing Tara's character, Devdutt Pattanaik insightfully remarks: "Tara appears as a negotiator and peacemaker, demonstrating capabilities that Sugriv lacks. Her beauty and intelligence elevate her, giving rise to the folklore that she was churned from the ocean of milk by the gods. She is no ordinary vanara" (183).

Kane's portrayal of Tara is that of a politically astute, intelligent, and perceptive individual. She openly criticizes Sugriv for forming an alliance with Ram, stating that by aligning with Ram to facilitate Vali's murder, Sugriv has set his own kingdom on a path toward destruction. She warns Sugriv, "Do you understand how many Vanaras will perish because of your selfish desire to eliminate Vali?" (Kane 288). When Sugriv neglects his pledge to Ram and indulges in luxury rather than aiding in Sita's rescue, Ram sends Lakshmana to Kishkindha to correct Sugriv's behavior. Tara meets Lakshmana and reassures him that they will do everything possible to rescue Sita, thereby shielding Sugriv from Lakshmana's wrath. This event is referenced in numerous mainstream sources, including the Mahabharata. Pradip Bhattacharya, in his influential work *Pancha-kanya: Indian Epics' Five Virgins*, notes: "In the Mahabharata, there's an intriguing statement indicating that Vali and Sugriv fought over a woman. This woman was undoubtedly the extraordinary Tara, as Sugriv, upon hearing of Lakshmana's arrival, is so captivated by Tara that he becomes oblivious to the news regarding his first wife, Ruma. This notion is further supported in the Valinese dance (Kebyar)" (30).

However, in *Tara's Truce*, Tara does not permit Sugriv to establish any close physical relationship with her, even after their marriage. She remains devoted solely to her late husband, Vali, and is not the cause of Sugriv's distractions. Nonetheless, as Sugriv indulges in worldly pleasures, prompting Lakshman's anger due to his insincerity and ingratitude, Tara steps in to pacify Lakshman. Kane reimagines this scene from traditional narratives in her distinctive style. Tara's intellect, wisdom, foresight, and kind words remind Lakshmana of his mother, Sumitra. Lakshmana acknowledges her with respect, saying: "You remind me of my mother... just as graceful, with a hint of sadness in her calm eyes; just as wise, making decisions, guiding people quietly and firmly" (Kane 282).

16. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this analysis demonstrates that a thorough examination of traditional sources alongside Kane's novel *Tara's Truce* reveals a stark contrast between the conventional depiction of Tara as a passive character and Kane's portrayal of her as an empowered and politically astute woman. The exploration of themes such as Tara's selflessness, intelligence, and her critiques of patriarchal norms highlights the alternative perspective Kane offers. As a result, this paper contributes to a larger discourse on gender representation within mythology and underscores the importance of feminist retellings in transforming cultural narratives.

Kane's portrayal of Tara presents her as a self-sufficient and assertive individual, directly challenging traditional gender roles and societal expectations, thus illustrating women's strength in defiance of these norms. Adopting a feminist lens when examining mythological figures creates a more nuanced understanding of these well-known characters, prompting audiences to re-evaluate established narratives that often overlook women's emotional needs and sense of identity due to societal neglect. Kane confronts patriarchal ideologies head-on, reimagining them through the experiences of marginalized women while honoring divine femininity as depicted in their struggles. This approach reveals the hidden challenges and messages that advocate for female empowerment, all while acknowledging the societal expectations intricately woven into these narratives.

The article significantly enriches current understanding of the subject by discussing how women have demonstrated empowerment and resilience throughout mythologies. It suggests a need for a re-evaluation of how we perceive women's roles in both historical and contemporary contexts. By encouraging a reassessment of women's agency and determination within mythological adaptations, the article urges readers to reflect on women's positions in historical accounts and modern societies. By investigating the themes of female empowerment and resilience found within myths, it emphasizes that these narratives illuminate critical societal expectations placed on women and highlight the conventional stories that merit re-evaluation.

17. SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

This research examines specific aspects of how mythological retellings are presented and why the core of the original narratives remains preserved. However, there are more urgent issues that warrant further investigation. Does the renewed interest in mythology, whether through fictionalization or interpretation, reflect a growing sense

of pride in cultural heritage? Could this interest lead to religious and caste-based politics? Will these Hindu retellings contribute to increasing political tensions? While previous studies in mythology have been extensive, there has been limited focus on how and why these stories are revisited and continually appreciated. Much of the existing research is influenced by literary, humanitarian, and feminist frameworks, yet none address why the essence of these stories endures in the minds and hearts of readers. This research aims to explore these questions through a content analysis of the book *Tara's Truce* by Kavitha Kane.

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