



HER STORY UNVEILED: THE EMPOWERMENT OF A FORGOTTEN MYTHICAL WOMAN

Anindita De

Faculty, JIS University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

***Corresponding Author: Anindita De**

Abstract

A cherished source of reverence, curiosity, and research, the *Ramayana*, renowned for its awe-inspiring storyline and the grand portrayal of Ram, commands a broad appeal, existing as a beloved cultural legacy throughout generations in the collective ethos of the subcontinent. However, while focusing on themes such as the grand conflict between two alpha male characters, the triumph of justice over injustice, obedience to parental authority, and the fulfilment of duty, the ancient narrators have not given much importance to the female characters. This paper focuses on one such ignored woman, Tara, the wife of monkey king Vali and one of the *Pancha-kanyas* of Indian mythology. Using several mainstream *Ramayana* narratives, this paper discusses male narrators' negligence of Tara. Moreover, using Kavita Kane's recently published novel *Tara's Truce* (2023) as the primary source, this paper explains how Kane, being a woman as well as a re-teller of ancient mythological stories, has woven a story centred on Tara, thus giving her the spotlight of which she has been deprived so far.

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

The mainstream versions of the *Ramayana*, known for its grand storyline, has overlooked most of its female characters, reducing them to stereotypical roles. However, in the era of postmodernism, the resurgence of revisionist mythopoeia has gained prominence, subverting and questioning grand narratives by offering alternative perspectives. Renowned authors like Neil Gaiman, Madeline Miller, Natalie Haynes, Rick Riordan, and others have recreated tales from Greek and Roman mythology. This genre has also gained popularity in India, with authors like Amish Tripathy recreating the personalities of Ram and Sita in his novels, Devdutt Pattanaik simplifying complex philosophies narrated in the two Indian epics, Mallika Sengupta and Amit Chaudhuri retelling Sita's tale in their respective *Sitayanas*, Navaneeta Dev Sen recreating Surpanakha's personality and critiquing Ram and Lakshman's actions of mutilating Surpanakha, Volga creating a bond of sisterhood between Sita and Surpanakha, and so on, thus offering fresh insights and perspectives on Indian cultural heritage. Therefore, it can be said that, revisionist mythology exposes patriarchal doctrines embedded in mainstream myths and sheds light on the complex identities of previously ignored female characters. As Alicia Ostriker says: "Since the core of revisionist mythmaking for women poets lies in the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth, revisionism in its simplest form consists of hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them" (74-75). To quote from the paper "Surpanakha's Mutilation or That of Womanhood?":

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Revisionist writers are remodelling the age-old stories in a feminist language to counterattack the patriarchal humiliation and to articulate the female emotions that have been suppressed for centuries. They aspire to give voice to the prejudice and discrimination that mythological women have experienced and to destabilize the so-called 'natural' attributes that have been ascribed to women by patriarchy (De 2)

In the field of revisionist mythmaking within the Indian cultural context, Kavita Kane stands out as a notable figure. Till now, she has published eight novels, revolving around women such as Uruvi, Urmila, Menaka, Surpanakha, Satyavati, Ahalya, Saraswati, and Tara, earning widespread popularity among readers. *Tara's Truce*, published in 2023, stands as her most recent literary endeavour. In this novel, Kane has sketched Tara as a brave and empowered woman whose profound wisdom makes a long-lasting impact on the other characters of the story as well as saves her kingdom from destruction. Using *Tara's Truce* as the primary source, this paper explores how Kane has offered an alternative perspective on Tara, shedding light on her overlooked qualities and providing her with a newfound significance in Indian mythology.

Tara, one of the esteemed *Panchakanyas* in Indian mythology, has not received much attention from the tellers and re-tellers of *Ramayana* stories. Scholarly analysis of her character has also been very limited so far. However, Tara is not an isolated case; a multitude of female personas within epic narratives have endured similar negligence and disregard. To quote from the paper "Exploring Shanta Myth through the Trajectory of Feminism":

As we live in a patriarchal society, there have been many examples where the deeds of select male characters of the epic are exaggerated to attract the reader's attention and, except for propagating certain misogynistic notions of female chastity and Stree dharma, female characters are largely overlooked. Some of these women, even though the narrators have used them for fulfilling the interests of the menfolk, are made invisible in such a way that the readers are not even aware of their existence. (De 98)

Subverting this trend, in her latest novel, Kane has focused on a previously neglected character like Tara, aiming to delve into the unexplored aspects of her personality. However, before initiating a detailed discussion on the novel, it is crucial to shed light on how Tara's character is depicted by mainstream mythmakers.

Tara, first married to Vali and then to Sugriv after Vali's death, briefly appears in the "Kishkindha Kanda". Valmiki has provided a detailed commentary on Tara's lament and distress after Vali's death, suggesting her feelings of helplessness and vulnerability as a widow. However, as Valmiki has hinted, the subsequent conjugal union between Tara and Sugriv after their marriage signifies a transformation in their relationship. It is implied that Sugriv's obsession with Tara's charm has led him to neglect his other responsibilities. Tulsidas depicts how Ram consoles the grieving Tara, imparting wisdom to her regarding the transitory nature of mortal life and enlightening her about the ephemeral nature of worldly attachments (724). In the *Giradhara Ramayana*, it has been described how Tara vents her anger on Ram, asking him to kill her as well, saying "you have made me a widow, removing all the signs of a chaste married lady" (Giradhara 178). In the *Krittibasi Ramayana*, Tara is even more fierce. She not only blames Ram for his wrongdoings but also curses him, stating that he will never be able to live happily with Sita. She declares:

সীতা উদ্ধারিবে রাম আপন বিক্রমে /সীতারে আনিবে ঘরে বহু পরিশ্রমে/ কিন্তু সীতা না রহিবে সদা তব পাশ/ কিছুদিন থাকিয়া
করিবে স্বর্গবাস/ কান্দাইলা যেইরূপ কিস্কিন্দ্যানগরী/ কান্দাইয়া তোমারে যাইবে স্বর্গপুরী॥ (Krittibas 221)

(Translation: you will be able to rescue Sita. But she will not always stay by your side. After some days, she will leave you and go to heaven. Just as you caused us pain, similarly Sita will make you cry and then depart.)

Moreover, in the *Krittibasi Ramayana*, Tara curses Ram that, as a consequence of his negative *Karma*, he will be killed by Vali in his next birth. In this context, eminent mythologist Pradip Bhattacharya writes:

In *Krittibas' Bengali Ramayana*, Tara curses Rama to be slain by Vali in a future birth. This is confirmed in *Mahabharata* and *Ananda Ramayana* where the hunter who causes Krishna's death is Vali reborn. In several vernacular versions of the epic, Tara also curses Rama that he will not be able to enjoy the company of Sita for long. (28)

Another point that deserves attention is that, in most of the versions of the *Ramayana*, Tara is first married to Vali, and after Vali's demise, following the rule of her clan, she marries Vali's younger brother Sugriv. However, some sources have indicated a polyandrous relationship between Tara and the two brothers. To quote from Wikipedia:

While the *Ramayana* states that Tara first weds Vali, some *Ramayana* adaptations sometimes present a polyandrous relationship between Tara, Vali and Sugriva. The *Ranganatha Ramayana* states that Tara is given to Vali and Sugriva as a reward for helping the gods. A Tamil folk tale tells that after the *amrita* emerged, Tara rises and is given as a common wife to both Vali and Sugriva. (web)

In sharp contrast to this, Kane has sketched Tara as solely devoted to Vali. From the very beginning of her novel, Vali and Tara are attracted to each other. They are childhood friends and lovers. But they not only dream about a happy family; they also want to devote their lives to the welfare of their tribe. Kane's Tara is an educated, dignified, wise woman whose world does not revolve around herself and her lover; she is very much concerned about how her tribe is oppressed and marginalised by other social groups. During her conversation with Vali, she proudly asserts that their tribe is as cultured as other so-called elite communities. Perhaps people from other social groups fail to comprehend their cultural ethos or mock them for their supernatural skills, such as tree climbing. However, such derision reflects a deficiency in their own perspective.

Kane has thrown light on Tara's childhood days and depicted how she has turned out to be a healer, a compassionate human being. When Tara was four years old, her mother died while giving birth to her younger sibling. The sight of blood, screams and agony left an indelible mark on her psyche. As she grew older, she became a healer by profession. Reflecting on her mother's death, she sheds light on women's reproductive health and childbirth, describing childbirth as a form of warfare. While ballads of valour are composed for the deceased male warriors in battle, no one remembers the stories of the women who died while giving birth. "There's no glory, no heroism in such a death. It's so usual, just data and digits, and life goes on as usually as death" (Kane 35). Moreover, Tara dreams that if she ever gives birth to a daughter, she will grow to be fearless and independent-minded, refraining from financial dependence on her husband or any male counterpart, and will learn to thrive by virtue of her own capabilities.

In her novel, Kane has mentioned the story of Tara, Rishi Brihaspati's wife, who fell in love with Chandra, the embodiment of the moon. Despite her love for Chandra, societal obligations compelled her to suppress her desires and to return to her husband. Kane has tried to emphasize the similarities between the two Taras in the sense that, the protagonist of *Tara's Truce*, like her namesake, becomes the catalyst for a conflict between two siblings. From the very beginning of the novel, Kane has hinted that both Vali and Sugriv are attracted to Tara. However, Tara harbours romantic feelings only for Vali, while she considers Sugriv a brother and a friend. After discovering the secret of Tara's relationship with Vali, Sugriv undergoes profound emotional upheaval, leading to subsequent distancing between him and Vali. Even after marrying Ruma, Sugriv's resentment towards Vali and his all-consuming love for Tara do not diminish in the least. Despite Tara's repeated efforts to reconcile the differences between Vali and Sugriv, she faces continuous failure. Even when Sugriv's wife Ruma confides in Tara about her miserable marriage to Sugriv, Tara is unable to bring happiness into their marital life. However, her profound selflessness shines through as she entrusts Ruma with the guardianship of Angad, her only son, as Ruma is unable to conceive, thus offering Ruma a sense of purpose and fulfilment in life.

Tara acts as Vali's guiding star. She encourages him to explore his hidden potential and to devote his life for the betterment of their community. "You promised to give us a better future—so give it" (Kane 73). Moreover, she refuses to become her husband's shadow. She dedicates herself to the education and nurturing of orphaned children, thus finding fulfilment in serving others. While Tara proudly acknowledges Vali's triumphs, she openly criticizes his wrongdoings as well. When Vali succumbs to becoming a tyrannical ruler, Tara tries to lead him onto the path of righteousness and moral integrity, seeking to rekindle his commitment to virtue and ethical behaviour. She asks Vali: "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 repeated warnings, Vali engages in a duel with a demon named Dundubhi. When some parts of Dundubhi's dead body fall into the hermitage of the sage Matang, the furious sage curses Vali, warning that his death will occur if he ever ventures near the hermitage and surrounding area. This curse serves as the catalyst for Vali's downfall. But Vali, instead of correcting himself, keeps on doing more sinful activities, like mercilessly killing people, banishing his brother Sugriv, keeping his (Sugriv) wife Ruma as a prisoner, and so on. After hearing about Ravan's abduction of Sita, Tara tells Vali that he is also a criminal like Ravan, as he has sent his brother into exile and kept his brother's wife captive in his harem against her consent. When Sugriv challenges Vali to a duel, Tara, with her keen intelligence and foresight, suspects that Sugriv has formed an alliance with a powerful individual, or else he would not dare to challenge Vali with such audacity. However, despite Tara's warning, Vali engages in the duel, and as planned beforehand, Ram, hiding in the nearby bushes, kills Vali with an arrow. This particular episode has been mentioned in almost all the mainstream sources of the *Ramayana*.

In *Tara's Truce*, Kane has also highlighted Tara's selfless nature. Despite receiving the devastating news of her beloved husband's death, Tara controls her emotions, prioritizing the welfare of her subjects. Addressing her subjects, she affirms: "The king is dying....But that does not mean you are orphaned. You are safe." (Kane 243). However, Tara vehemently criticizes Ram's ethical values, condemning his intervention in others' family disputes and his decision to shoot an arrow at an unarmed Vali from the cover of his secret hideout. She states: "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 on an unarmed, vulnerable person, may you all be killed the same way—helpless and defenceless" (Kane 252). Calling both Ram and Sugriv cowards, she states: "You robbed him of a hero's death he deserved, instead killing him by treachery." (Kane 248). Tara criticizes Ram's morally questionable act of slaying Vali and curses him. Firstly, she declares that just as he killed Vali when he was defenceless, Ram too will meet his end in a similar manner. Secondly, though Ram will manage to rescue Sita from Ravan, he will never be happy with her; he will lose her again. Sita will leave him and return to Mother Earth forever. It seems that Kane has borrowed this incident from the *Krittibasi Ramayana* and recreated it.

Addressing Lakshman, Kane's Tara points out that while Lakshman has made great sacrifices for his own brother, he has not taken any stand despite being fully aware of Sugriv's treachery against his elder brother Vali. When Lakshman calls Vali a characterless person for keeping Sugriv's wife Ruma in his harem, Tara replies that even though Vali imprisoned Ruma, he never disrespected her, nor did he ever entertain the thought of molesting her. However, Sugriv has harboured romantic feelings towards Tara from the beginning, and it is out of the vile desire to fulfil his lust for Tara that he did not even hesitate to commit such a heinous act. Moreover, Tara does not hesitate to criticize Lakshman's misogynistic attitude. On some other occasion, when Hanuman praises Lakshmana's respectful behaviour towards women, Tara responds sarcastically, saying "try telling Ravan's nose-less sister that!" (Kane 271).

In Kishkindhian society, when the elder brother passes away, it is customary for the younger brother to marry his widow. Following the conventions of her community, Tara reluctantly consents to marry Sugriv, reminding the reader of another female character from the *Ramayana*, Mandodari, who, after the death of her husband Ravan, married her brother-in-law Vibhishana for similar reasons. Tara realizes that

her marriage to Sugriv is a much-needed step to ensure peace and stability in the kingdom and to deter any potential rebellion by the subjects. That's how Tara saves the kingdom at the expense of her own well-being. By taking this step, she also secures her political rights as a queen and her son Angada's political rights as the future king of Kishkindha. She understands that Sugriv lacks the competence to govern effectively. Therefore, to ensure the welfare of people and to consider their concerns, it is essential for her to hold the power and position of the queen. Nonetheless, she makes it clear to Sugriv that her acceptance of this union is purely motivated by political reasons, indicating that there will be no conjugal relationship between them. As Ruma says:

Sugriv is a mere figurehead of a king from now on. Tara, you are the true power of Kishkindh; everyone knows and respects that. Besides, it is mostly Jambavan and Hanuman with whom Ram and Lakshman confer with. They should know that most of the pearls of wisdom they acquire are from your brain (Kane 267).

Analysing Tara's character, Devdutt Pattanaik aptly points out: "Tara comes across as a negotiator and peacemaker. She shows a capability that Sugriva lacks. Her beauty and intelligence put her in a class of her own, giving rise to folklore that she was churned out of the ocean of milk by the gods. She is no ordinary vanara" (183).

Kane's Tara is a politically wise, intelligent, and foresighted person. She fiercely criticizes Sugriv for forming an alliance with Ram. She says that, by establishing friendship with Ram to facilitate Vali's murder, Sugriv has set the stage for the destruction of his own kingdom. As a return for Ram's favor, Sugriv and his subjects will have to assist Ram in rescuing Sita. She asks Sugriv: "Do you realize how many Vanaras will be killed because of your selfish, solitary wish to destroy Vali? (Kane 288).

When Sugriv neglects his promise to Ram and indulges in luxury instead of aiding in the search for Sita, Ram sends Lakshmana to Kishkindha to discipline Sugriv. Tara confronts Lakshman and assures him that every possible effort will be exerted from their side to rescue Sita, thereby saving Sugriv from Lakshmana's wrath. This episode is mentioned in several mainstream sources, even in the *Mahabharata*. Pradip Bhattacharya, in his seminal work *Pancha-kanya: Indian Epics' Five Virgins*, writes:

In *Mahabharata*, there is an interesting statement that Vali and Sugriva fought over a woman. Surely that woman was the remarkable Tara, for when attendants report Lakshmana's arrival, Sugriva is so engrossed in Tara, and not in his original wife Ruma, that he remains oblivious to the news. This idea is reinforced when we find that in the Valinese dance (Kebyar). (30)

In *Tara's Truce*, however, Tara does not allow Sugriv to develop a close physical intimacy with her, even after their marriage. She remains steadfast in her devotion solely to her former husband, Vali, even after his demise. Therefore, she is not the reason behind Sugriv's distraction here. Nevertheless, while Sugriv indulges in worldly pleasures and his lack of sincerity and ungratefulness evoke Lakshman's anger, Tara approaches Lakshman and helps him to calm down. Having borrowed this scene from mainstream narratives, Kane has reconstructed it in her own signature style. Tara's intellect, wisdom, foresight, and affectionate words evoke memories of Lakshmana's own mother, Sumitra, within him. Lakshmana respectfully acknowledges: "You remind me of my mother... Just as elegant, with sadness tinging her calm eyes; just as wise, making decisions, guiding people, quietly and firmly" (Kane 282).

To conclude, it can be stated that, through a detailed analysis of traditional sources and Kane's novel *Tara's Truce*, the paper contrasts the traditional portrayal of Tara as a passive figure with Kane's depiction of her as an empowered and politically wise woman. Themes such as Tara's selflessness, intelligence, and criticism of patriarchal norms are explored, underscoring the alternative perspective offered by Kane. Thus, the paper contributes to a broader discourse on gender representation in mythology and highlights the significance of feminist retellings in reshaping cultural narratives.

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