

A Comparative Study of Nature and Narrative in the Retellings of the Mahabharata and Ramayana by Kavitha Kane and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract

The research paper offers a comparative study of nature and narrative in the retellings of the Mahabharata and Ramayana by Kavitha Kane and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Both epics, which are the foundation of Indian literature, have been reinterpreted by contemporary authors, bringing new insights on their intricate tales and the interaction of human experiences and natural environments. Kavitha Kane and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's retellings highlight how nature is deeply entwined into the fabric of these ancient tales. Kane's works, notably "Karna's Wife" and "Sita's Sister," use nature not only as a backdrop, but also as an active participant in determining the characters' fates. Divakaruni's "The Forest of Enchantments" and "Palace of Illusions" both use natural environments to reflect and enrich their emotional and spiritual journeys. The research paper focuses at how each author employs ecological elements like forests, rivers, and mountains, to represent larger themes like honor, exile, and redemption. It investigates the role of nature in these legends, contrasting how current retellings approach ecological and cultural significance with conventional interpretations. By evaluating these selected works, the paper hopes to show how contemporary adaptations of ancient epics interact with nature to provide new insights into age-old stories.

Keywords: Modern Adaptations, Nature Symbolism, Ecological Significance

Introduction

The Mahabharata and Ramayana, two of India's most renowned epics, are often regarded as the foundational works of Indian literature, depicting the complex interplay of human virtues, vices, and the underlying moral order. These ancient texts, deeply rooted in the Indian subcontinent's cultural and spiritual awareness, have been repeated and reinterpreted over the years, with each retelling adding a new perspective to the ageless stories. Contemporary authors such as Kavitha Kane and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have provided new retellings of ancient epics, concentrating on underrepresented voices and delving into the complex interplay between environment and story.

Kane and Divakaruni, through their respective works, highlight the significance of nature in shaping the lives and destinies of their characters. The research paper investigates how these authors use natural elements to enrich the themes of honor, exile, and redemption, adding new layers to these ancient stories. This study examines Kane's *Karna's Wife* and *Sita's Sister*, as well as Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* and *Palace of Illusions*, to discover the ecological and cultural relevance of these modern adaptations.

The Role of Nature in Kavitha Kane's Retellings

Kavitha Kane's retellings, particularly *Karna's Wife* and *Sita's Sister*, depict nature as more than just a backdrop; it becomes an intrinsic element of the characters' emotional landscapes and the story's unfolding. Nature is inextricably related to the character of Uruvi, Karna's wife, who frequently seeks refuge in the natural world during the upheaval of her life. The rivers, forests, and mountains in Kane's story are more than just backdrops; they play an active role in the drama, mirroring the protagonists' internal and exterior strife. For example, in *Karna's Wife*, the river Ganga represents the inevitability of fate as well as the cyclical aspect of time. Uruvi's regular walks to the riverbed are moments of introspection, with the river serving as a metaphor for the flow of her life, bringing her through times of joy, grief,

and resignation. Kane employs the river not only as a physical setting, but also as a narrative technique to reflect Uruvi's mental journey. The Ganga's unrelenting flow, unconcerned about human problems, serves as a reminder of the wider cosmic order that governs the epic's protagonists.

In *Sita's Sister*, Kane investigates the forest as a site of exile and metamorphosis. Kane reimagines the forest, which has historically been associated with solitude and peril in the Ramayana, as a place of growth and self-discovery for the female characters. Urmila, frequently overshadowed by her more famous sister Sita, discovers her voice and strength in the jungle. In Kane's retelling, the natural world has agency, influencing and molding the characters' decisions and destinies. The forest, with its dense trees and secret paths, represents life's intricacies as well as the characters' unknown destiny.

Kane's use of nature in her retellings not only develops her characters' emotional and psychological qualities, but it also emphasizes the connectivity of human experiences with the natural world. Kane provides a nuanced view of the Mahabharata and Ramayana by emphasizing nature as a crucial aspect in her narratives, which resonates with contemporary worries about the environment and the human presence within it.

The Role of Nature in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Retellings

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works, *The Forest of Enchantments* and *Palace of Illusions*, both use nature as a key factor in recounting these old epics. In contrast, Divakaruni's retellings emphasize the spiritual and emotional links between the characters and the natural world.

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, the forest is more than just a physical area where Sita spends her exile; it is a living thing that mirrors her deepest thoughts and emotions. Divakaruni depicts the woodland as enchanting, with nature responding to Sita's presence. The woods, rivers, and animals become part of her journey, providing comfort and friendship in times of sadness. In Divakaruni's version, the forest serves as both a shelter and a mirror of Sita's soul, reflecting the natural world and the human spirit.

Divakaruni's picture of the forest contrasts with traditional Ramayana readings, which frequently represent the forest as a source of misery and peril. Instead, Divakaruni depicts the forest as a haven of beauty and tranquillity, where Sita's inner strength and tenacity are nourished. The jungle becomes a place where Sita may reconnect with her inner self, free of the confines of royal life. This reworking of the forest as a site of empowerment mirrors Divakaruni's feminist approach to the retelling, in which nature serves as an ally rather than an adversary in Sita's journey of self-discovery.

Similarly, in *Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni employs the natural world to mirror her characters' emotional moods, particularly Draupadi. The palace, described as a place of illusions and deceptions, is surrounded by gardens and landscapes that play an equal role in the story as the human characters. Draupadi's experiences and emotions are metaphorically represented by the changing seasons, flower blooming, and river movement. The natural world in *Palace of Illusions* is a living organism that constantly shifts and changes, much like Draupadi's life.

Divakaruni's use of nature in her retellings is more than just symbolism; it serves as a platform for examining the characters' deep spiritual and emotional qualities. The natural

world is more than just a setting; it shapes the characters' adventures and reflects their inner lives. Divakaruni uses nature to reimagine the Mahabharata and Ramayana in a way that speaks to current audiences, providing new insights into these old stories.

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