

## Book Review

***Tara's Truce* by Kavita Kane**

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Kavita Kane's *Tara's Truce* presents a compelling reimagining of the Queen of Kishkindha, Tara, the wife of Vali, within the framework of the *Ramayana*. In this novel, Kane continues her literary project of foregrounding marginalised or peripheral female figures from Hindu mythology, a thematic concern evident in her previous works, including *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019), *Sita's Sister* (2014), and *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* (2017). In Kane's most recent book, Tara is repositioned as a complex, fully realised protagonist. This book follows a larger tradition in modern Indian literature that aims to retell myths from a feminist and socially conscious perspective. It critically examines conventional gender roles, power dynamics, and political accountability in epic narratives, making it a significant contribution to contemporary mythological fiction.

The novel begins with a compelling epigraph in Tara's voice: "Do we mean anything? Are our desires, our dreams relevant to the course of destiny at all?" (Kane xii). The novel's central concern with the invisibility of women's desires within the vast machinery of dharma and destiny is encapsulated in this philosophical investigation. Kane skilfully navigates Tara's emotional and intellectual negotiations amid a turbulent socio-political landscape as she reconstructs her internal conflicts. Tara is a woman who goes beyond the traditional division of duty versus desire in her roles as Queen, widow, mother, and political strategist.

Kane's feminist lens is central to the narrative, as she not only reclaims Tara's agency but also extends the discourse to encompass gender and sexuality through her inclusion of Vrikshraj, the father of Vali and Sugriva, thereby introducing a rarely discussed LGBTQIA+ perspective within the *Ramayana*. Though this subplot remains underexplored, it signals Kane's intent to destabilise the patriarchal narrative by addressing intersections of gender and sexuality. The novel further examines the intricate interpersonal dynamics, particularly the tension between Vali and Sugriva and their competing affections for Tara. While the *Ramayana* traditionally relegates these relationships to the periphery, *Tara's Truce* repositions them at the narrative's core, offering a fresh perspective on their political and emotional entanglements. Particularly compelling is Tara's confrontation with personal grief and political responsibility following Vali's death. After Ram kills Vali in a controversial ambush, Tara emerges as a stabilising force in Kishkindha, declaring: "The king is dying . . . But that does not mean you are orphaned. You are safe" (Kane 243). Her composed yet resolute leadership underscores the narrative's departure from traditional portrayals of royal widows. The story begins with Tara's dilemma of

marrying Sugriv, who happens to be her brother-in-law, after Vali, her husband, is shot dead, but her kingdom needs a king. Her life reflects her celestial namesake character, Tara, who is forced to give up her love for Chandra and be by her husband's side, Brihaspati, because of societal expectations. The rift between Vali and Sugriv over Tara causes a deep-seated resentment in Sugriv, which is not overcome after his marriage with Ruma, leading to an unhappy relationship. Tara tries to aid Ruma and provide a sense of fulfilment by entrusting her with caring for her only son, Angad. Kane has shown Tara as a wise, dignified, and educated woman deeply concerned about subjects beyond her desires and her alliance with Vali. She is profoundly invested in the state of her tribe, which has been facing marginalisation and oppression from the elite communities.

Apart from political and personal disputes, the book reveals the socio-cultural marginalisation of the Vanaras tribe. Tara, a vocal supporter of her people, reveals the contempt of the elite classes towards age-old activities including jungle survival and tree-climbing. Her interactions with Vali frequently address caste and class inequities, urging him to lead with justice and vision: "You promised to give us a better future—so give it" (Kane 73). This dimension of the novel invites a postcolonial reading, whereby subaltern identities are reclaimed and given narrative centrality.

Tara is shown as a determined, headstrong woman of substance, a reasonable human who loves all she has but does not come in the way of her lover's growth and even steers Vali's tyrannical behaviour towards righteousness by saying, "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). However, Vali gives in to his hubris and kills the asura, Dundubhi, during a duel and flings the torn corpse in rage, which lands on the hermitage of Rishi Matanga, desecrating it. The rishi, in turn, curses Vali, declaring that Vali will die if he ever steps on Mount Matanga, which later leads to the precursor of Vali's fall. When Tara cautions Vali after Sugriv challenges him to a duel using her intuition and wit, she is paid no heed by Vali, and he ends up getting fatally shot by Ram, who shoots an arrow while hiding in nearby bushes during his duel with Sugriv. After Tara receives the heart-wrenching news of Vali's death, she maintains her composure and handles the panic and fear created amongst her subjects owing to the death of their king. She reassures them by saying, "The king is dying ... But that does not mean you are orphaned. You are safe" (Kane 243).

Kane does not shy away from drawing attention to patriarchal hypocrisy. Tara condemned Ram's ambush, "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) and her pointed remarks to Lakshman and Hanuman sharply critique the moral contradictions in the epic's heroic characters. Tara questions the ethical scaffolding of *Ramayana's* justice system, particularly when she compares Sugriv's exile and Ruma's imprisonment to Sita's abduction. Her rhetorical sharpness culminates in her sardonic comment: "Try telling Ravan's nose-less sister that!" (Kane 271), mocking Lakshman's supposedly respectful treatment of women.

Tara's hesitant marriage to Sugriv is presented as a political tactic rather than something that is romantic. She says clearly that their marriage is meant to bring peace back into the kingdom and put off a likely civil war. Sugriv had no child from Ruma, thus the union confirmed Angad, Vali's son's claim on the throne of Kishkindha. Tara stated objectively that the purpose of

her marriage to Sugriv was to maintain peace and stability in the kingdom, and she would refrain from any form of marital relations with Sugriv. Ruma praises the intellectual ability of Tara when she states, "Sugriv is a mere figurehead of a king from now on, Tara. You are the true power of Kishkindh; everyone knows and respects that" (Kane 267), affirms Tara's de facto role as sovereign. This inversion of power subverts the trope of the grieving widow and replaces it with a nuanced portrayal of female political leadership.

Kane has shown Tara as a politically capable, bright and insightful character who does not hesitate to criticise and call out Sugriv, Ram, and Lakshman for their alliance in killing her husband Vali and routing her nation into panic and chaos. She chides Sugriv by saying, "Do you understand how many Vanaras will perish because of your selfish desire to eliminate Vali?" (Kane 288). Tara's character arc also embodies emotional intelligence and moral clarity. Her support of Sugriv when Lakshman seeks retribution for his failures suggests a balance of empathy and political astuteness. She also receives commendation from Lakshmana for her admirable insight, wisdom, and emotional stability when he compares her personality traits to his mother, Sumitra, when he states, "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).

In reimagining Tara's story, Kane also addresses women's reproductive health and maternal mortality. The trauma of Tara's mother's death in childbirth is not merely backstory; it becomes a pointed critique of the systemic erasure of female suffering. Tara's comparison of childbirth to warfare, "It is not different from a battlefield . . . But there is no glory . . . It is so usual, just data and digits" (Kane 35), underscores the normalisation of women's pain and the lack of societal acknowledgement for their sacrifices. Such commentary enriches the feminist texture of the novel, situating it within a framework of biopolitics and embodied gendered experiences. The story asks ethical questions, has political insight, and beautiful language. Kane offers a radical reinterpretation while yet being very respectful of the source material and deliberate in her style. The book appeals to academic readers as well as a larger audience since it straddles the line between original narrative and loyalty to myth. Her work is clear-cut; mixing creative freedom with textual accuracy produces a vivid and emotionally charged work. Still, some things might have benefited from more thorough research. Although path-breaking in context, the LGBTQIA+ subplot stays peripheral and might have been more powerful with a longer character arc for Vrikshraj. Characters like Ruma and Surpanakha could also have had more narrative space, thus strengthening the intersectionality Kane aims to bring about.

Though limitations exist, *Tara's Truce* is an essential intervention in mythological fiction. Kane asks readers to re-evaluate whose stories we share and how we present them by stressing the voices of mythic women and questioning the grand narratives of righteousness and dharma. Tara's intelligence, tenacity, and sensitivity redefine what it means to be a heroine in myth and present a story that speaks to modern feminist theory. Offering both a literary and political re-evaluation of mythological memory, Kavita Kane's *Tara's Truce* is an elegant and sharp reworking of a neglected voice in the *Ramayana*. Through a woman's life sometimes neglected in epic narrative, it powerfully illuminates themes of duty, justice, gender politics, and statecraft. Reflecting a great passion to transform literary traditions from a feminist perspective, Kane's portrayal of Tara is dignified, courageous, and layered. The book belongs in both scholarly debates and popular readership circles since it questions accepted wisdom and greatly helps to shape the continuous change of mythological retellings in Indian literature.