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EVOLVING PURPOSE AND EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE: EXPLORING IKIGAI IN KAVITA KANE'S *TARA'S TRUCE*

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Abstract: This study explores the Japanese philosophical concept of *ikigai* the reason for being through the lens of Kavita Kane's novel *Tara's Truce*. By examining the protagonist Tara's evolving sense of purpose, the study identifies how her passion, mission, vocation and profession intersect to shape her identity and resilience across different phases of her life. Drawing upon psychological interpretations of *ikigai*, particularly as theorised by Meiko Kamiya and Katsuya Inoue, the article analyses Tara's emotional intelligence, moral courage and political agency within a patriarchal and hierarchical society. It highlights how Tara redefines her purpose through personal loss, social commitment and ethical resistance, thereby offering a dynamic model of *ikigai* that is culturally grounded yet universally resonant. The narrative not only underscores Tara's role as a healer, queen and mediator but also reflects on the broader human quest for meaning amidst suffering and transformation. Ultimately, this study argues that *Tara's Truce* presents *ikigai* as a fluid and resilient force that allows individuals, especially women, to assert agency and forge identity in both personal and public realms.

Keywords: Ikigai, cultural identity, purpose, agency and emotional resilience.

The concept of *Ikigai* was first popularized by Meiko Kamiya in her book *On the Meaning of Life*. The term derives from 'iki,' meaning "alive" or "life," and 'gai,' meaning "benefit" or "worth." The book *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life* describes *ikigai* as a sense of purpose in life, offering value and joy through relationships, work, hobbies, and other pursuits. *Ikigai* is not imposed externally but emerges organically from within, making it deeply personal and tied to one's inner self.

Japanese psychologist Katsuya Inoue defines *ikigai* through two key concepts: the sources or objects that give life meaning, and the feeling that one's life is valuable because of those sources. He further classifies *ikigai* into three types: first, as social, meaning it is recognized by society; second, as non-social, reflecting personal beliefs such as self-discipline, hope and self-control; and third, as anti-social, where *ikigai* may stem from darker emotions like hatred or revenge. *Ikigai* is subjective and varies by individual experience. Therefore, it cannot be precisely contained within conceptual frameworks, as it is unique to each person's journey in life.

Kavita Kane's *Tara's Truce* examines the character of Tara through the lens of *ikigai*, exploring how her passion, mission, vocation and profession intersect to shape her journey and purpose. Tara's passions are multifaceted and evolve throughout the narrative. As a physician, Tara's love for healing is evident from the beginning. This passion grew from her grief after her mother died in childbirth: "We talk about heroes dying on the battlefield. What about so many women battling their death during childbirth? Are they not brave?"

Don't they face a certain death? Yet they are not hailed as heroes, just a vague casualty in the scheme of things" (35). She not only treats physical ailments but also comprehends emotional and spiritual wounds, as seen when she medicates Vali and Sugriv upon their return from Rishi Gautam's ashram.

Her romantic love for Vali is a central component of her character. However, her love for Vali is not blind. When Vali confessed his love, he spoke of his ambition to rule and unify Kiskindh. Later, when he proposed to Tara again, she refused. She rejected him because she felt he had strayed from his goals, settling instead into complacency. "You are anything but stupid, Vali, but you are getting smug and abundantly complacent. Have you accomplished even a single goal you had once discussed with me? You were to go with Jatayu and talk with the clans to unite them. You started it and left it midway. You still are a self-satisfied drifter, Vali, and I have no wish to marry a man with no sense of responsibility!" (68). Tara's challenge to Vali reveals her passion for motivating those around her to strive for their best selves.

Tara's fierce sense of justice and fairness is evident in her confrontations with both Vali and Ram. She openly criticises Vali's rage and ego, especially in the killings of Mayavi and Dundubhi. Likewise, she challenges Ram's ethics when Vali is killed: "Since when have warriors fought from behind trees? From when did archers shoot at the unarmed? Since when have princes fought other people's family battle?" she asked, her voice rasping, dripping ice (247). Her intellectual curiosity is revealed in her inquiries about Gautam's curse on Ahalya and her questioning of her own name's meaning.

Tara's societal contributions are crucial in a world lacking medical knowledge. Her role as a physician, continuing her father Sushen's legacy, brings invaluable aid to her people. Politically, Tara mediates internal and external disputes in Kiskindh. When Lakshman confronts Sugriv for breaking his vow to Ram, Tara defuses the crisis with wisdom, as evidenced by Lakshman's reflection:

"You remind me of my mother," he said abruptly. 'Just as elegant, with sadness tingeing her calm eyes; just as wise, making decisions, guiding people, quietly and firmly.

He was surprised to see colour rise to her cheeks.

'Mother!' she murmured. 'I am old!' she said with a chuckle. 'Your mother Queen Sumitra is known for her quiet wisdom. Your father took her advice.' ...

'It is only because of you that I got to realize that there was more to this than what I believed. It was a shortcoming on my part, which you opened my eyes to. Through your timely intervention, the crisis has been averted.'" (281, 282)

Tara not only engages in statecraft but questions outdated customs. For instance, she resists marrying Sugriv after Vali's supposed death required by tradition for Angad to be the next heir arguing that customs should serve people, not bind them. In a warrior society, she offers essential emotional support. When Ruma is exiled by Vali in retaliation against Sugriv, Tara empathises and supports her.

Tara's emotional intelligence is undeniable. This is evident in the complex triangle between herself, Vali and Sugriv. She is aware that Sugriv loves her even before she marries Vali, but she handles the situation tactfully, preventing insecurity for both Ruma and Vali. Tara often anticipates future conflicts, as seen when she warns Vali that Sugriv may find a powerful ally, Ram. Upon learning Ram and Lakshman are in the forest searching for Sita, she deduces that Sugriv seeks Vali's defeat with their help.

Tara endures multiple challenges. When Sugriv claimed Vali was dead after fighting Dundubhi, Tara did not believe him and ordered a search. She stood firm against social norms, refusing to remarry until Vali returned. After his death, she calmed the public by proclaiming his death and assuring stability an example of leadership and mental presence.

Near the novel's end, Sugriv pleads for forgiveness: "He stared into her unhappy eyes. 'Am I worth your hate?' he sighed in a flat, tired voice. 'I feel this more so after knowing what you did with Lakshman today. Your resilience and wisdom, your self-sacrifice is remarkable. But seeing your anger and your hate, I can't help being affected by it'" (290). He begs not for himself but for her peace, urging her to release the burden

of grief and rage. Tara reminds herself that clinging to the past serves only sorrow. She reiterates that her and Vali's vision was to make Kishkindh strong, aligning with Sugriv's promise to Ram. "All I have now is hope and courage. For both of us" (295). Tara exhibits extraordinary forgiveness, enabling her to find peace and purpose.

Tara's roles afford her status, influence, and security. As a physician, she earns societal respect and livelihood. As Vali's wife and later queen, she wields political power and shapes Kishkindha's future. Her wisdom makes her an indispensable advisor counseling Vali, resolving disputes, and guiding Sugriv. As Angad's mother, she is invested in Kishkindha's succession, enhancing her political influence.

Tara's *ikigai* lies at the intersection of passion, mission, vocation and profession but it evolves over time. Initially, her *ikigai* centres on her healing role and relationship with Vali. She finds purpose in helping others while pursuing personal happiness. As events unfold, it includes her mediating role in governance. After Vali's death, her *ikigai* expands to encompass her duties as queen and mother. Ultimately, her journey toward forgiveness becomes part of her *ikigai* enduring hardship with grace and wisdom.

Tara finds purpose from childhood, despite constant struggles. She loses her mother and becomes a physician after training with her father to treat battlefield patients. After marrying Vali, her life's centre shifts to societal and familial well-being. At the novel's end, her mission is to safeguard Kishkindh and improve it for future generations. In each life stage, Tara faces adversity and endures it by anchoring herself to purpose and responsibility. This is poignantly seen when she says to Sugriv:

"If life is about endurance and tolerance, then it's best to endure and tolerate with a smile than a tear," she sighed, her breath quavering... All human tribulation seemed to reduce to dust. The sun scattered the mist, and she saw across the ageless river the path of love and loss she had suffered. There was another path, she dimly discerned, that they were to follow the path that led to peace. (294, 295)

Tara's journey illustrates that *ikigai* is not a fixed destination but a dynamic equilibrium that shifts with time. Her ability to find meaning in every life phase, despite daunting challenges, renders her story compelling. Kavita Kane's *Tara's Truce* masterfully embodies the universality of *ikigai*. Though set in ancient India, Tara's quest for purpose deeply resonates with modern readers, affirming that the pursuit of meaning is an enduring element of the human experience.

Throughout the narrative, Tara continually redefines her purpose in response to life's evolving challenges. From her early days as a physician driven by personal grief, to her roles as wife, queen and mediator, Tara's *ikigai* evolves with her experiences. This transformation reflects the journey of modern individuals who reassess life's meaning through changing circumstances. Tara's experiences normalise the tumultuous search for purpose, affirming that this quest while deeply personal is timeless and universally human.

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