

From Intellectual Knowledge to Emotional Wisdom: Reading Emotional Intelligence in Kavita Kane's *Sarasvati's Gift*

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Abstract

Kavita Kane's *Sarasvati's Gift* (2021) reimagines the Hindu goddess Sarasvati not merely as an embodiment of knowledge but as an emotionally complex, intellectually independent, and ethically conscious woman. Although the novel has been widely approached through the critical frameworks of feminism, mythology, gender, and intellectual agency, its representation of emotional intelligence deserves closer attention. This paper argues that Kane constructs Sarasvati as a figure whose intelligence becomes meaningful through self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, relational understanding, and ethical decision-making. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of emotional intelligence developed by Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer and subsequently popularized by Daniel Goleman, the study examines Sarasvati's responses to love, marriage, motherhood, betrayal, social expectations, and interpersonal conflict. The novel distinguishes intellectual ability from emotional maturity while ultimately suggesting that knowledge reaches its fullest significance when accompanied by emotional awareness and ethical responsibility. Sarasvati's refusal to accept conventional definitions of womanhood demonstrates self-awareness and autonomy, while her interactions with Brahma reveal the difficulties involved in balancing emotional attachment with individual identity. The paper further argues that Kane's mythological retelling transforms Sarasvati from a static symbol of wisdom into a psychologically nuanced subject whose emotional choices challenge patriarchal assumptions. Thus, *Sarasvati's Gift* presents emotional intelligence as a form of inner knowledge and proposes that true wisdom requires the ability to understand both the self and others.

Keywords: Kavita Kane, *Sarasvati's Gift*, emotional intelligence, Sarasvati, feminism, mythology, self-awareness, emotional maturity

Introduction

Contemporary Indian mythological fiction frequently revisits traditional narratives in order to question inherited assumptions about gender, identity, power, and human relationships. Kavita Kane is one of the prominent writers associated with this literary tendency. Her novels reinterpret women from Indian mythology by giving greater narrative significance to characters whose voices have often remained secondary within traditional narratives. *Sarasvati's Gift*, published in 2021, focuses on Sarasvati, the goddess associated with knowledge, music, language, creativity, and learning. Penguin Random House

describes the novel as an exploration of Sarasvati's story through the voices of "nameless celestials, powerful gods and lesser mortals," while also emphasizing her unusual relationship with Brahma and her independent personality ("Sarasvati's Gift").

The significance of Kane's representation lies in her refusal to reduce Sarasvati to an abstract symbol of knowledge. Kane herself has explained that she wanted to explore Sarasvati as more than a goddess and to consider the implications of knowledge in contemporary life. She also describes mythology as a means of exploring universal experiences such as love, loyalty, hope, disappointment, human flaws, and inner conflict (Kane). This observation provides an important point of departure for understanding Sarasvati's Gift through the concept of emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence generally refers to the capacity to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions effectively. Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer define emotional intelligence as "involving the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, discriminate among them, and use emotional information to guide thought and action" (189). Daniel Goleman later popularized the concept by emphasizing self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills as important dimensions of emotional competence.

When read through this framework, Sarasvati emerges as a particularly significant literary representation of emotional intelligence. Her intellectual strength is accompanied by a persistent awareness of her own identity. She questions social expectations, resists the idea that marriage should determine a woman's identity, and negotiates her emotional relationship with Brahma without completely surrendering her individuality. Consequently, Kane's Sarasvati demonstrates that wisdom is not merely the accumulation of knowledge. It also involves understanding emotions, negotiating relationships, recognizing personal boundaries, and making ethically meaningful choices.

This paper therefore argues that Sarasvati's Gift presents emotional intelligence as an essential dimension of wisdom. Through Sarasvati's emotional conflicts and choices, Kane establishes a connection between intellectual independence and emotional self-knowledge.

Emotional Intelligence: A Critical Framework

The concept of emotional intelligence provides a useful theoretical framework for examining Kane's Sarasvati. Salovey and Mayer distinguish emotional intelligence from conventional notions of intelligence by emphasizing the processing of emotional information. "They propose that individuals can perceive emotions, understand their meanings, regulate emotional responses, and use emotions in ways that support thought and action" (190-91).

Goleman expands this model by identifying several dimensions of emotional competence, particularly self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social competence. Emotional intelligence therefore does not mean the suppression of emotion. Rather, it involves recognizing emotion and responding to it thoughtfully.

This distinction is particularly relevant to Sarasvati's Gift. Sarasvati is not portrayed as emotionally detached simply because she is the goddess of knowledge. Instead, she experiences affection, disagreement, disappointment, anger, uncertainty, and attachment. Her intellectual identity repeatedly interacts with her emotional life. Her challenge is not to eliminate emotion but to understand its relationship with autonomy and ethical decision-making.

Kane thus complicates the conventional opposition between reason and emotion. Sarasvati's intelligence does not make her emotionless. Instead, her intellectual awareness enables her to question the emotional

and social structures surrounding her. Emotional intelligence becomes a form of knowledge, while knowledge becomes incomplete without emotional understanding.

Sarasvati and the Development of Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is one of the most important components of emotional intelligence. It involves recognizing one's emotions, values, motivations, strengths, limitations, and personal identity. Sarasvati's characterization in Kane's novel is strongly connected with this form of self-awareness.

From the beginning, Sarasvati resists being defined exclusively through her relationship with Brahma. Her identity as a goddess of knowledge, music, and creativity is central to her understanding of herself. She refuses to accept the idea that becoming a wife should erase or subordinate her individual identity.

This aspect of her personality is significant because conventional patriarchal structures frequently define women through relational identities: daughter, wife, or mother. Kane reverses this pattern by presenting Sarasvati as a woman who understands herself before allowing others to define her.

Her attitude toward motherhood further demonstrates this self-awareness. Sarasvati does not automatically accept motherhood as a compulsory component of feminine identity. Instead, she considers it a personal decision. In the novel, she states, "It was my decision. . . It is usual for me...It is not defiance" (Kane 286). The statement is significant because Sarasvati distinguishes personal choice from rebellion. She does not reject motherhood merely to oppose social convention; she rejects the assumption that social convention should determine an individual woman's decision.

This distinction corresponds closely with emotional intelligence. An emotionally intelligent individual is capable of identifying personal motivations rather than simply reacting against external pressure. Sarasvati's decision is therefore an expression of self-awareness rather than impulsive resistance.

Kane subsequently makes the issue explicitly universal when she observes through Sarasvati's perspective that "It all comes down to the personal decision of the woman" (Kane 295). The significance of this position extends beyond motherhood. It establishes the principle that emotional and personal choices require individual agency.

Sarasvati's self-awareness consequently becomes a form of emotional strength. She knows what she values, understands the boundaries she wishes to maintain, and attempts to make decisions according to her own understanding rather than external expectations.

Emotional Regulation and the Problem of Anger

Emotional intelligence does not require the absence of anger. Instead, emotional regulation involves understanding emotional responses and preventing them from controlling judgment. Sarasvati's characterization demonstrates this tension repeatedly.

As a powerful divine figure, Sarasvati could theoretically respond to disagreement through unquestioned authority. Kane, however, humanizes her by allowing her to experience emotional conflict. Her responses to interpersonal situations are not always emotionally neutral. Her anger and disappointment become part of the psychological complexity of the character.

The significance of such moments lies in the fact that Kane does not present Sarasvati as an idealized figure without emotional weaknesses. Instead, the goddess of knowledge must also negotiate the consequences of emotional reactions. This makes her more psychologically credible and demonstrates that intelligence does not automatically guarantee emotional perfection.

A critical reading of Sarasvati therefore reveals a productive tension between knowledge and emotion.

She possesses extraordinary intellectual power, yet she must still learn how emotions operate within relationships. Her development is not a movement from ignorance to knowledge in the conventional sense. Rather, it is a movement toward a more complex understanding of how knowledge, desire, attachment, anger, and responsibility interact.

This is particularly important within an emotional-intelligence framework because emotional maturity is not equivalent to emotional silence. Sarasvati's emotional experiences become meaningful precisely because she reflects upon them.

Sarasvati and Brahma: Emotional Intelligence in Relationships

The relationship between Sarasvati and Brahma forms one of the most significant emotional structures in the novel. Penguin Random House characterizes their marriage as an unconventional relationship between “fiercely independent minds” (“Sarasvati’s Gift”). Their relationship therefore differs from a traditional model in which the woman’s identity is subordinated to the male partner.

Brahma is attracted to Sarasvati not merely because of her beauty or divine status but because of her intellectual qualities. Their relationship consequently becomes a meeting between two forms of consciousness. Sarasvati’s emotional challenge is to maintain her individuality while acknowledging her attachment to Brahma.

This tension is central to emotional intelligence because relationships require both self-awareness and awareness of others. Excessive individualism can prevent emotional connection, while excessive dependence can weaken personal identity. Kane places Sarasvati between these two possibilities.

Her relationship with Brahma illustrates that emotional maturity does not mean sacrificing individuality for intimacy. Instead, a mature relationship requires the recognition of two autonomous selves. Sarasvati wants companionship without losing her intellectual freedom. Brahma, in Kane’s representation, must therefore recognize that love cannot legitimately become possession.

The relationship consequently becomes a negotiation between autonomy and attachment. Sarasvati’s emotional intelligence lies partly in her attempt to articulate this distinction. Her choices demonstrate that love does not necessarily require the abandonment of selfhood.

This aspect of the novel also supports Kane’s broader feminist intervention. The author has described mythology as a medium through which universal human experiences can be reconsidered in contemporary terms. Sarasvati and Brahma’s relationship therefore becomes more than a mythological romance; it becomes a reflection on how individuals negotiate identity within intimate relationships.

Empathy and the Recognition of Others

Emotional intelligence also includes empathy, or the capacity to recognize and understand the emotional experiences of others. Sarasvati’s knowledge is significant because it is not represented solely as intellectual accumulation. Her knowledge has social and ethical consequences.

As the goddess associated with learning, music, speech, and creativity, Sarasvati represents forms of knowledge that enable communication. Communication itself requires sensitivity to the experiences of others. Language can create relationships, resolve conflict, transmit wisdom, or generate misunderstanding.

Kane’s use of multiple narratorial voices reinforces this idea. The story is not confined exclusively to Sarasvati’s perspective. Instead, gods, celestials, and lesser figures participate in the narrative. This structure creates a more plural understanding of the mythological world. Penguin Random House

specifically notes the novel's use of these peripheral voices to bring Sarasvati's story into focus ("Sarasvati's Gift").

The narrative technique can therefore be interpreted as an enactment of emotional intelligence. By moving among perspectives, Kane encourages readers to recognize that events acquire different meanings for different individuals. A single action can produce different emotional consequences depending upon the person experiencing it.

The novel's multiple voices also prevent Sarasvati from becoming an isolated symbol. Her identity develops through relationships and social interactions. Knowledge is consequently presented as relational rather than purely individual.

Intellectual Intelligence versus Emotional Intelligence

One of the most important contributions of *Sarasvati's Gift* is its implicit distinction between intellectual intelligence and emotional wisdom. Sarasvati possesses exceptional knowledge, but the novel does not suggest that knowledge automatically produces perfect judgment.

This distinction corresponds with the work of Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso, who argue that emotional intelligence represents a distinct form of ability related to the processing of emotional information (197). Intellectual ability may help an individual understand concepts, but emotional intelligence helps that individual understand the emotional meaning of situations and relationships.

Kane's Sarasvati embodies this distinction. She is intellectually powerful, but her encounters with love, marriage, motherhood, disappointment, and social expectations require forms of understanding that cannot be acquired solely through abstract knowledge.

Her emotional journey therefore adds another dimension to the traditional image of Sarasvati. The goddess of knowledge becomes a figure who must also understand herself. Knowledge turns inward and becomes self-knowledge.

The title *Sarasvati's Gift* can consequently be interpreted in a broader manner. The gift is not simply knowledge given by a goddess to humanity. It may also refer to the ability to transform knowledge into wisdom. Knowledge informs the mind, whereas emotional intelligence helps an individual determine how that knowledge should influence relationships and decisions.

Feminist Agency and Emotional Maturity

The feminist dimension of Kane's novel is inseparable from its treatment of emotional intelligence. Sarasvati's independence challenges the assumption that femininity requires emotional dependence or social conformity.

Kane has stated that she was interested in the fact that Sarasvati is widely revered as the goddess of knowledge, creativity, education, and wisdom, yet remains comparatively less familiar as a personality and character. Her novel therefore attempts to move Sarasvati from symbolic representation to psychological subjectivity.

This transformation has important consequences. Once Sarasvati becomes a character rather than merely an icon, her emotions become narratively significant. Her choices, conflicts, disappointments, and relationships require interpretation.

Her refusal to allow marriage or motherhood to become compulsory definitions of womanhood demonstrates emotional autonomy. Importantly, autonomy here should not be confused with isolation.

Sarasvati can care for others while maintaining boundaries. She can experience attachment without surrendering identity.

This is one of the central lessons of emotional intelligence: healthy emotional life requires both connection and self-definition. Kane's Sarasvati therefore becomes a literary representation of a woman who seeks equilibrium between personal freedom and interpersonal responsibility.

The River Sarasvati as a Metaphor for Emotional Consciousness

The river imagery associated with Sarasvati provides another productive way of interpreting the novel. Kane connects the goddess with the lost river Sarasvati and uses the disappearance of the river as an opportunity to consider the disappearance or neglect of knowledge in contemporary society. In an interview, Kane explained that she was interested in the allegorical possibility of asking what would happen if knowledge disappeared from the world.

The river can also be interpreted metaphorically in relation to emotional intelligence. Like a river, emotional life is dynamic rather than static. Feelings change, relationships evolve, and human responses develop according to circumstances. Emotional intelligence therefore requires movement and adaptation rather than rigid emotional control.

Sarasvati as river and Sarasvati as goddess of knowledge can consequently be read together. Knowledge must flow if it is to remain meaningful. Likewise, emotional awareness must be allowed to move through reflection, communication, empathy, and self-regulation.

The disappearance of the river thus becomes symbolic of a broader cultural danger: when knowledge is separated from ethical and emotional consciousness, it can lose its transformative power. Kane's novel repeatedly returns to the importance of using knowledge responsibly.

Emotional Intelligence as a Form of Feminist Resistance

Sarasvati's emotional intelligence also functions as a mode of resistance. Patriarchal systems frequently attempt to regulate women through prescribed emotional roles: women are expected to be obedient, nurturing, self-sacrificing, and accommodating. Kane's Sarasvati challenges these expectations by asserting the legitimacy of her own emotional and intellectual choices.

Her resistance is not simply physical or political. It is psychological. She refuses to allow other characters to determine what she should desire, whom she should marry, or whether she should become a mother.

This form of resistance is particularly significant because emotional intelligence involves recognizing the difference between external expectations and internal values. Sarasvati's ability to identify what she genuinely wants allows her to resist social definitions that conflict with her sense of self.

Her feminist agency therefore emerges through self-knowledge. She does not need to reject emotion in order to become independent. Instead, she uses emotional understanding to define the conditions under which relationships can coexist with freedom.

Conclusion

Kavita Kane's *Sarasvati's Gift* can be productively understood as a novel about the relationship between intellectual knowledge and emotional wisdom. While Sarasvati traditionally symbolizes learning, Kane transforms her into a psychologically complex character whose intellectual identity is inseparable from her emotional development.

Through the theoretical lens of emotional intelligence, Sarasvati demonstrates several important qualities: self-awareness in defining her identity, emotional regulation in negotiating conflict, empathy in understanding relationships, and social awareness in responding to the expectations of others. Her relationship with Brahma particularly demonstrates the difficulty of balancing emotional attachment with individual autonomy.

The novel's treatment of marriage and motherhood further reveals that emotional maturity involves making conscious personal choices rather than simply following inherited social expectations. Sarasvati's statement that her decision is "not defiance" (Kane 286) is especially significant because it separates autonomy from rebellion. She does not reject convention merely for the sake of opposition; she seeks the freedom to determine her own emotional and personal life.

Ultimately, Kane's Sarasvati suggests that knowledge without emotional understanding remains incomplete. The goddess of wisdom becomes wise not only because she knows, but because she questions, reflects, negotiates, experiences, and chooses. In this sense, emotional intelligence becomes another form of Sarasvati's gift. The novel invites readers to reconsider intelligence as something broader than academic or intellectual achievement. True wisdom involves understanding the self, recognizing the emotions of others, maintaining meaningful relationships, and making ethically responsible choices.

Kane's mythological retelling therefore remains relevant to contemporary discussions of gender and emotional life. Sarasvati's journey demonstrates that a woman's intelligence and emotional identity need not be separated from one another. Instead, intellectual independence and emotional intelligence can function together as sources of agency. Through Sarasvati, Kane ultimately presents wisdom not as a static possession but as a continuous process of knowing, feeling, reflecting, and choosing.

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